

BUNGO STRAY DOGS

DAZAI, CHUUYA, AGE FIFTEEN

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

7





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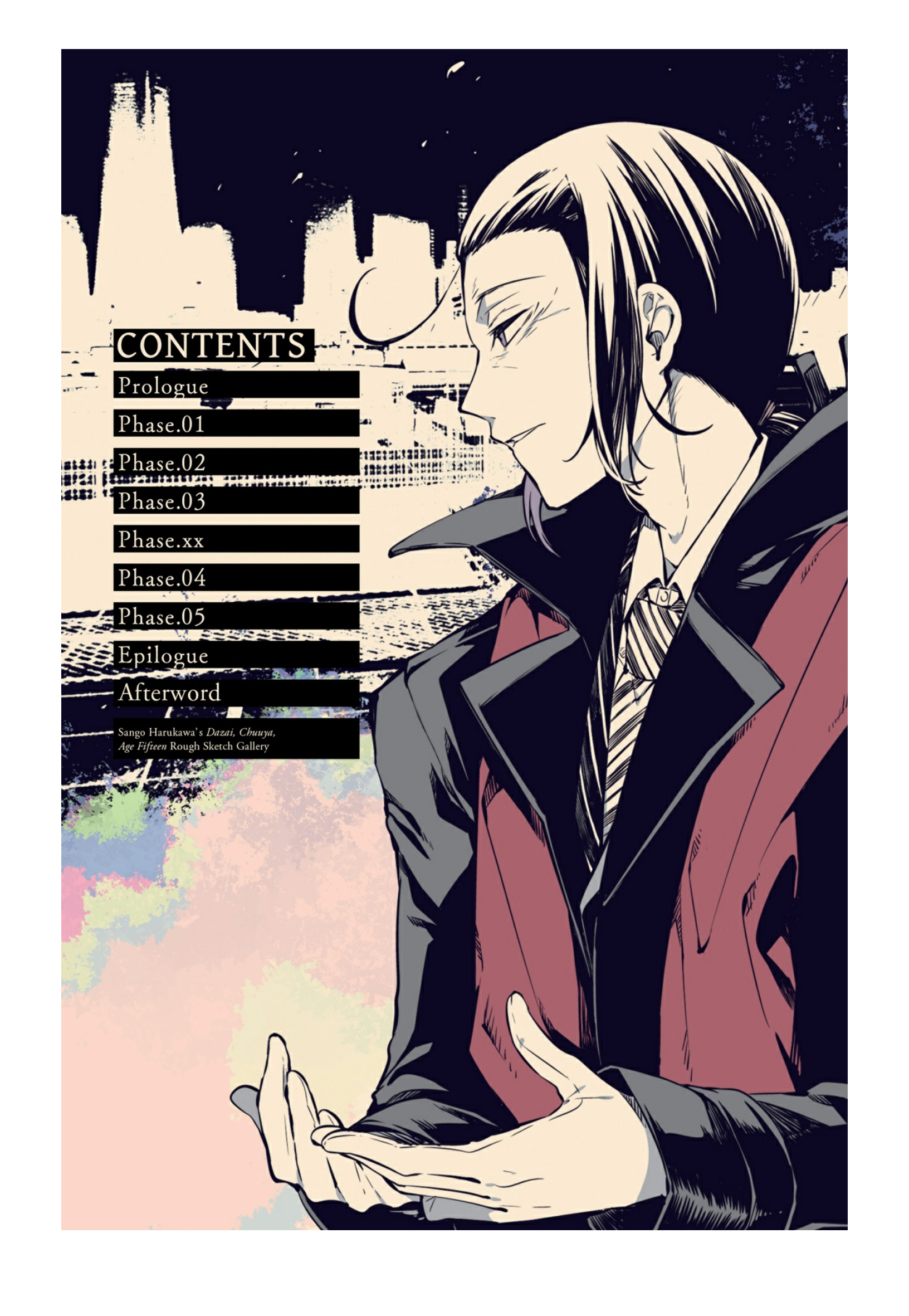




At the
center of
the blast
wasn't the
previous
boss.

It didn't
bear the
slightest
resemblance;
it wasn't
even
human.

A beast.
It was a
pitch-black
beast.



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B U N G O

STRAY DOGS

DAZAI, CHUUYA, AGE FIFTEEN



KAFKA ASAGIRI

ILLUSTRATION BY

SANGO HARUKAWA



Copyright

Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 7

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Translation by Matt Rutsohn

Cover art by Sango Harukawa

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Prologue

A small passenger aircraft soared through the clear blue sky. Only one passenger sat aboard: a man wearing sunglasses and a black suit. Sweat poured down his pale face as his eyes anxiously darted around the empty aircraft. Hunched over like a child afraid of a nighttime wind, he clutched a pistol in both hands as if it was his good luck charm. The man, a mafioso, had just escaped from a certain powerful organization by the skin of his teeth.

Knock, knock.

He heard a sudden knock, then looked in the direction of the noise to find that it was coming from *outside* the window.

There was a boy outside.

He was around fourteen or fifteen years old and had a smile on his face. Unfathomable—they were over fifteen hundred feet in the air, on a plane in mid-flight.

“Yo. Hope you don’t mind if I join ya,” said the boy, although the man could only see his lips forming the words.

“It’s—it’s the Sheep King!” the mafioso shrieked.

He jumped back just as the boy kicked the window in, shattering it in the process. A powerful vortex rushed through the aircraft, and then the difference in atmospheric pressure sucked out all the air, causing the plane to violently shake. But the mafioso paid no mind to the rush of wind nor the shaking. He crawled on the floor, doing whatever he could to escape the intruder. The boy stepped on his back and pinned him down.

“You’re part of the Port Mafia’s weapons transport, and *this* scares you?” the boy scoffed, a note of amusement in his voice.

His dark green leather biker jacket complemented his reddish-brown mane. He proceeded to rip a nearby chair out of the floor with his bare hands, then threw it at the broken window. The chair acted like a lid, stopping the violent wind from rushing through the inside of the craft.

“P-please forgive me!” the mafioso begged as he squirmed under the boy’s foot. “I—I’m sorry I messed with the Sheep’s turf! I didn’t have a choice!”

“Yeah, I bet you didn’t. No way you Port Mafia bastards knew what you had comin’. You hit us, we Sheep hit back and then some. But don’t sweat it—I already killed all the other guys involved in your little ambush. Rest assured I’ll be givin’ you the same send-off as your friends.”

The mafioso reached out for his gun that he had dropped, but he couldn’t reach it. In fact, he wasn’t even able to lift a finger. His face twisted, bones cracking as his body was pushed into the floor. All he could manage was a moan. And yet, the boy had only a single foot on his back.

It was gravity. The boy was using gravity to make his foot exceedingly heavy.

“Impressive. I guess that’s the Port Mafia for ya,” the boy observed amusedly. “Even with all this gravity crushing you, you’re still thinking of ways to fight back... Okay, then. Try your luck. But first, answer me this: Why did you attack our turf?”

“I didn’t...want...to attack it!” It sounded as if every last breath was being squeezed out of the mafioso’s lungs. “I didn’t have a choice... Our arsenal...was destroyed...by that calamitous god—by Arahabaki! The black flames...have returned from the pits of hell...!”

“‘Arahabaki’?”

The boy’s smirk vanished. The gravity weakened, albeit for a split second.

This was an opportunity. The mafioso seized that moment to roll away, grab his gun, and aim it at the boy. He was clearly very experienced with firearms.

The boy simply kept his hands in his pockets and fixed the mafioso with an icy glare.

“Go ahead—shoot me. See what happens.”

“Die... Die, Sheep King—Chuuya Nakahara!”

He pulled the trigger.

Hands still in his pockets, the boy unflinchingly spun to one side and kicked the bullet. The moment it collided with his foot, the bullet ricocheted, piercing the mafioso’s throat. Blood spurted out of his neck as he collapsed backward.

The boy swung back around and announced:

“I’m gonna kill every last member of the Port Mafia.”

Phase.01

This man was troubled. Simply at a loss.

He was in the middle of a stare-down with several documents, a cigarette in his mouth. He stood from his chair and stretched, stared at the numbers on the wall, rubbed his brow, then sat back down and groaned like a bull about to draw its last breath. He faced the documents once more only for the meaningless shapes on the pages to vanish.

“This is hopeless...”

His black hair half-heartedly combed back, the man was dressed in a white lab coat with worn-out sandals and a stethoscope around his neck. Dark bags hung under his eyes. He was clearly a doctor—one in a dingy clinic that was a mess to say the least. Scattered about were stethoscopes, medical records, and bookshelves full of academic texts. On the wall in front of his desk was an X-ray film viewer. Very much the picture of a doctor in a hospital office. And yet, this man wasn't actually a doctor, and this wasn't a hospital. In fact, it was the complete opposite.

“Our weapons smugglers are two weeks behind schedule. My men are going to be fighting with kitchen knives at this rate. And it doesn't stop there. We've already had three violent incidents this month where the city police had to get involved. I'm losing control of the low-level grunts,” the man complained as he eyed the documents.

His name was Ougai Mori, leader of a powerful underground organization known as the Port Mafia. Having acquired the position only a year earlier, he was still relatively new to leadership.

“We're losing contracts for our protection business, conflict with other organizations is escalating, our turf is getting smaller by the day,” Mori went on.

“This isn’t good. It’s been one problem after another ever since I took over as leader this past year. I never expected leadership to be so difficult... Maybe I’m just not cut out for this. What do you think, Dazai? Are you even listening to me?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“So which is it?”

The one to answer Ougai was a lanky boy seated on a nearby stool. He wore an oversized black overcoat, and a white bandage wrapped around his forehead was peeking out from under his messy dark hair.

His name was Osamu Dazai, age fifteen.

“Come on, Mori. Everything that comes out of your mouth is always so boring!” Dazai complained as he fiddled with a medicine bottle. “It’s starting to sound like you’re chanting a mantra. ‘We don’t have enough money. We don’t have enough intel. My men don’t trust me.’ You knew from the start that things would turn out this way.”

“Well, maybe you’re right...” Mori scratched his head in vexation, then suddenly said, “By the way, Dazai, why are you mixing hypertension medicine with hypotension medicine?”

“Huh? Because maybe something cool will happen, and I’ll be able to die in peace.”

“That isn’t going to kill you!” Mori seized the bottle. “*Sigh*. How did you even open the medicine cabinet? It was locked.”

“Give that back! I wanna die!” Dazai flailed his arms. “Life is so boring; I’d rather just die! But I want it to be quick and painless! Help me out, Mori!”

“I’ll teach you how to properly mix drugs if you promise to be a good boy and stay out of trouble.”

“Liar! You’re just saying that so you can use me! Do you have any idea how much you’ve put me through this past year?! And what did you teach me? Nothing! I’m gonna quit this organization and join one of our rivals!”

“Now, now, learn to think before you talk. Your death won’t be quick and

painless if you betray us.” Mori smiled darkly.

“Sigh... I’m sooo bored. Why’s the world such a boring place?”

Dazai began swinging his lanky legs back and forth. Dazai wasn’t one of Mori’s subordinates. He wasn’t even in the Mafia. He was neither Mori’s secret illegitimate child nor an orphan he’d adopted, and he certainly wasn’t a medical assistant. No single word or phrase could accurately describe their relationship. The closest approximation would be *bound by a common destiny*.

“More importantly, Dazai...,” Mori said with a sigh. “You were the only one there when I inherited the previous boss’s position. In other words, you are the sole witness to his final will and testament. I can’t have you dying on me that easily.”

That common destiny bound them together one year ago. Mori, the Port Mafia boss’s personal physician, and Dazai—who’d merely been brought in for care after a suicide attempt—conspired and carried out a secret plan: assassinating their leader. The man’s final words had been nothing more than a fabrication.

“It didn’t work out like you planned, though,” Dazai said with remarkable clarity.

“What do you mean?”

“Choosing someone who’d attempted suicide to be your accomplice was an excellent idea. But here we are, an entire year later, and I’m still alive...and that’s why that deep-seated fear is still eating at you.”

For a brief moment, Mori felt as if ice had been pressed against his organs.

“...What are you talking about?”

“You *know* what I’m talking about. You’re afraid someone will find out that you assassinated the previous boss.”

Dazai’s expression was unchanging, which made reading his thoughts nigh impossible. His face was as still as the frozen surface of a lake.

“What do you mean it ‘didn’t work out’?” Mori furrowed his brow as if he were scolding Dazai. “Nothing fell short of expectations. You and I successfully

carried out the mission one year ago. It wasn't without hardship, however, which is exactly why I never want to do something like that again."

"The mission isn't over yet," Dazai suggested with a cold gaze. "It only ends when everyone involved in the assassination and fabrication of the boss's final testament has been silenced...*permanently*. Right?"

Mori's emotions hit him like a tidal wave. "...You..."

Dazai's gaze quietly penetrated Mori, as if his eyes could see inside the man's body like some sort of medical device.

"To that end, I was the perfect accomplice. Nobody would suspect a thing. Once you became the boss after I vouched for you...I could have simply killed myself for some unknown reason."

The pair spent the next few moments staring at each other in silence so heavy and noxious you might think it was a stare-down between the grim reaper and a demon. A single word rang in Mori's head over and over like an alarm.

Miscalculation.

You misjudged the situation, he told himself. You failed to pick the optimal solution. You shouldn't have chosen this child to help you. Dazai is unpredictable. He can be sharp but in a dark, twisted way. He's observant. He's cold and calculating with no equivalent even in the Mafia, where the most evil reside.

"...I'm kidding. I was just making stuff up because I get a kick out of watching big shots like you squirm. It's what I've been doing to keep myself entertained lately," Dazai said before quickly returning to his usual laid-back, unfocused expression.

Mori quietly observed him. Dazai showed flashes of brilliance one moment, but the next moment, they were gone. As soon as he seemed to have it all figured out, he'd confuse everyone by talking about his bizarre, meaningless fascination with suicide. It had never occurred to Mori before he became a leader, but something about Dazai brought a certain person to Mori's mind.

"You remind me of someone," Mori said without a second thought.

“Who?” Dazai asked, curious.

But Mori didn’t answer the question.

“At any rate, stop teasing your elders,” he said, smiling faintly. “Me? Permanently silence you? Don’t be ridiculous. Besides, I would have done that long ago if I’d really wanted to. It’d be simpler than breathing. How many times have I stopped you from killing yourself this year alone? It’s quite taxing, you know. I even disarmed a bomb under your chair once like the protagonist in a movie.”

He couldn’t let Dazai die. Because if he did...the previous boss’s supporters within the organization would most definitely turn on Mori and claim he was behind his predecessor’s death. He’d already stopped two assassination attempts that year, both of which had been planned by his predecessor’s supporters. Of course, the traitors were disposed of, but there was no telling how many in this anti-Mori faction remained within the Mafia. Hence why he had to keep Dazai alive. And Mori found another reason this past year to do just that.

“Dazai, if you really want, I can prepare a drug so that you can end things comfortably,” Mori claimed, opening his desk drawer and pulling out a sheet of paper that he swiftly wrote something on.

“Really?”

“I need you to do a quick investigation for me in return, though,” he said as he kept writing. “It’s not a difficult task. Nothing dangerous. But you’re the only one I can go to for help.”

“Sounds fishy.” Dazai eyed Mori reproachfully.

“You know Suribachi City near the Yokohama Settlement, correct?” Mori asked, ignoring Dazai’s remark. “Lately, there have been rumors that a certain individual has been seen in that area. I’d like you to go there and check if the rumors are true. This is called a Silver Oracle. It’s a delegation of authority, you could say. Show this to anyone in the Port Mafia, and they will do whatever you ask. Use it wisely.”

Dazai looked back and forth between Mori and the sheet of paper being

offered to him, then asked, “Who is this certain individual you want me to look for?”

“Guess.”

Dazai sighed. “I don’t want to guess.”

“Just guess.”

Dazai stared darkly at Mori for a few moments, then slowly replied.

“...There’s no way the most powerful man in the Port Mafia would give a second thought to some town gossip. That says a lot about just how important this rumor is. Plus, you’re giving me a Silver Oracle, which makes me think this individual isn’t what’s important. It’s the *rumor itself*. You have to know the truth, and you have to quash the rumor at the source; its spread alone is harmful. You asked *me* to investigate instead of a professional or one of your top subordinates, so there’s only one person this individual could be: *the previous boss*, right?”

“Exactly.” Mori nodded heavily. “There are some people who must never rise from the grave. I personally confirmed his death, even gave him a most exceptional funeral.”

Mori touched his fingertips, for he could still feel that moment. It was like cleaving a massive tree. He had cut open multiple people due to the nature of his work, but none had been as tough and thick as his predecessor. Not during any surgery he had ever performed.

He’d slit the previous boss’s throat with a scalpel, then covered the murder up by claiming the leader’s illness had brought on convulsions and he needed a tracheotomy to open his airway. Dazai, then only fourteen years old, had witnessed all this firsthand.

“Someone who must never rise from the grave, huh...?” Dazai muttered. After a few moments passed, he heaved a reluctant sigh and stood up. “Looks like I really am the only one you can go to for help,” he said before snatching the piece of paper from Mori. “You’re gonna get me that drug, then, okay? You better keep your word.”

Mori smirked and replied, “This is your first job. Welcome to the Mafia.”

Dazai began briskly walking to the door when he stopped all of a sudden.

“By the way, who’s the person you said I reminded you of?” he asked.

Mori smiled faintly. Then with a hint of melancholy in his expression, he gave his answer:

“Me.”

He’d needed an assistant—a secretary, a confidant, a right-hand man of the highest caliber. But as a doctor, a traitor, and a usurper, what he needed most of all was someone he could trust. He needed a subordinate with whom he could share everything, someone who could *understand* him as he alone stood at the organization’s apex, leading his subordinates.

It was an error on Mori’s part to take in Dazai. But not all errors are bad. This stone he’d picked up—which he’d planned on disposing of eventually—turned out to be a giant diamond in the rough.

Perhaps Mori was asking for too much as someone who followed such a bloody path. But this was Dazai, after all. So perhaps...

“Dazai,” Mori began while still pondering that question. “I may not be able to comprehend your answer, but I nonetheless want to know: *Why do you want to die?*”

Dazai seemed puzzled as he looked back at Mori, like he genuinely didn’t understand the question. Then, eyes full of youthful innocence, he responded:

“Let me ask you something instead: Do you truly believe there’s value in living?”



Suribachi looked just like it had sounded: a city built within a crater created by a massive explosion years prior. The original inhabitants perished in the mile-diameter blast along with any notion of who each section belonged to. All that remained was a wasteland in the shape of a Japanese mortar—a *suribachi*.

It wasn’t long before people arrived and decided to build their own city. They were society’s outcasts, or perhaps society never even acknowledged their existence to begin with. Suribachi bordered the Yokohama Settlement, a

designated conflict zone, and anyone could take up residence there regardless of legality. That drew people to create huts, build stairs, and even lay electrical wires. The site of the explosion soon became a haven for those scorned by prosperity and luxury. It was a gray city for gray people. And, of course, it was outside the authorities' radar, which naturally made it prime real estate for illegal organizations such as the Mafia.

Dazai was heading down a path in Suribachi.

"Oh? So drinking metal-plating solutions is an extremely popular method of suicide abroad, huh...? Interesting."

He was reading a book as he walked, his expression the epitome of serious. Dazai had never looked at someone with such solemnity.

"Hmm? What's this? It's only popular because it's the easiest chemical for industrial painters to get their hands on, and it's not a quick and easy death. Anyone who drinks the solution dies after spending hours in agony as their organs dissolve inside of them... Ack! I'm so glad I didn't give that a try!"

Dazai lifted his head and glanced at his Mafia escort behind him. "Hey, did you know that? Be careful next time you plan on killing yourself, uh..."

"Hirotsu," the escort answered, looking like a small dog backed into a corner. "I will...be sure to keep that in mind."

A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and a gentlemanly appearance, Hirotsu was a mafioso Dazai had chosen for his knowledge of the area. He wasn't particularly enthusiastic about having to be this boy's escort and guide.

Dazai was just a fifteen-year-old kid. He wasn't even in the Mafia. And yet, he had a Silver Oracle. Everyone, long-standing Mafia members included, had to be careful around him. Not only that, Dazai was one of the two people who witnessed the former boss's final moments, and now Mori had entrusted him with a top secret mission. There was clearly something more to all this.

Hirotsu knew instinctively that he had to treat Dazai with respect. These were instincts only someone who'd survived many years in the Mafia possessed.

The two of them had left that morning to ask around if anyone had seen the Port Mafia's former boss. They went from the slums to the most popular tourist

sites, following the rumors to their source. A boy and a middle-aged man made for a bizarre investigation team, but nonetheless, Dazai's uncanny ability to weasel information out of people proved useful. He managed to get most of the sources to tell him what he wanted without them even realizing it. Even the more stubborn individuals changed their tune the moment Dazai gave them a peek of the wad of bills Mori had provided him for this very purpose. Once they obtained all the information they could get their hands on, Dazai and Hirotsu started making their way back to headquarters.

"Dazai... Please do not walk too far ahead of me," said Hirotsu. "I am your escort, but this is nonetheless a conflict zone. There's no telling what could happen."

"'Conflict'?"

Hirotsu nodded and continued, "The Mafia is currently at war with three organizations: Takasekai, Gelhart Security Service, and a third group located here in Suribachi that shows no signs of letting up. They are an extremely eccentric group, nothing like any enemy we have ever faced... They have no official name, but simply go by 'the Sheep.' This week alone, they killed two of our squads. The unofficial leader is especially difficult to deal with. They say not even bullets work on him."

"Ohhh... No wonder I heard explosions and gunfire coming from over there. Doesn't make much difference to me, though..." Dazai grumbled in boredom. All of a sudden, there was a beep coming from his pocket—his phone.

"It's Mori." Dazai placed the phone against his ear. "Hello? ...Yeah, we're done here. I learned a bunch of things... Huh? 'How'? ...Who do you think I am? Anyway, to get straight to the point..." Dazai sounded like he couldn't care less. "The previous boss was here. He came back to life from the pits of hell, covered in black flames."

"*What?*" came Mori's shaky reply.

"There were a lot of witnesses. I guess the old man had a lot of regrets and couldn't let go of this world?" Dazai's lips curled into a cold-blooded smirk. "At any rate, I'll give you a detailed report when I get back—"

All of a sudden—without any warning—something hit Dazai squarely in the

torso, sending him flying through the air like a flower petal caught in a gust of wind. He smashed through a zinc-coated steel roof, causing the wooden hut underneath to collapse, then rolled farther into Suribachi while demolishing a well's fencing in the process.

"The Sheep!" He heard Hirotsu's shouts slowly fade into the distance. "Dazai!"

Dazai bounced down the hill until he went right through a shed, kicking up a whirlwind of dust and plywood...and then he finally stopped. He found himself atop a simple stucco building. However, *something* was on top of him: the shadowy male figure who had hit him moments ago.

"Ha-ha-ha! Now this is rich!" The figure roared with laughter. "A kid! The Port Mafia's so hard up for lackeys that they're hiring kids!"

It was a small-framed boy around Dazai's age dressed in a dark green biker jacket. He looked like a crow amid the dark of night.

"That hurt, you know?" Dazai, collapsed on his back, said emotionlessly. "I hate pain."

"I'm gonna give ya a choice, kid," the boy told him, hands still in his pockets. "Die now or die after givin' me the information I want. What's it gonna be?"

"I like those two choices. Both very tempting offers," Dazai replied unflinchingly, despite having been hit in the torso and knocked through several buildings. "Okay. Kill me now."

The boy in the biker jacket fell silent for a brief moment, then looked down at Dazai as if realizing he'd finally met a person of character.

"Hmph. I thought you'd just cry and run away. You're a surprisingly gutsy kid."

"You're a kid, too."

"Yeah, everyone I fight always says that at first, but they immediately realize their mistake. I'm no ordinary brat like you." The boy clenched his fist. "Now talk. Tell me everything about this Arahabaki you're lookin' into."

He then stepped on Dazai's wounded hand, cracking the bones under the sole of his shoe.

“...Oh. Arahabaki? I see... Arahabaki,” Dazai muttered. He stared at his hand being crushed as if it were someone else’s.



“So you *do* know, huh?”

“Nope. First I’ve ever heard of it,” Dazai replied flatly.

The boy grinned, then swiftly kicked Dazai. The ball of his foot struck Dazai’s bones with an agonizing creak. Dazai moaned in pain.

“All right, then,” the boy said. “Wanna go for the record? Longest someone’s ever lasted without talkin’ is nine kicks.”

Dazai’s face twisted in agony as he answered, “You’ll let me go...if I talk?”

“Yeah. I don’t pick on weaklings.”

Dazai fell into silent thought for a few moments. He then quietly stared at the boy above him with a serious expression and replied, “Okay... I’ll talk.”

His voice heavy and tense, he said:

“You ought to drink more milk. You’re really short.”

The boy kicked Dazai in the stomach once more, sending him rolling off the roof until he crashed into the fence below.

“I didn’t ask, ya little shit!” the boy shouted. “I’m fifteen. I’m still growing!”

“Heh... Then I’ll put a little curse on you. I, being fifteen as well, will continue to grow while you’ll stay the same height.”

“You’re really startin’ to piss me off!”

The boy had already made his way over to Dazai’s side and kicked him in the face. Dazai’s neck audibly creaked.

“That...hurt...you know?” Dazai groaned with a slight chuckle. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth; he must’ve cut the inside of his lip. “But thanks to you, I remembered something... The Sheep is one of Yokohama’s most influential support groups, and all its members are kids and teens. I heard it got its start after a bunch of kids created a self-defense force to fight back against gangs, looting, and human trafficking. They’re strictly defensive and nonviolent—and yet, hardly a soul dares to oppose them. The reason is simple. Anyone who steps on their turf pays for it dearly. And the one who makes them pay is none other than the Sheep’s leader himself. Now it makes sense. You’re the

Sheep King—Chuuya Nakahara, gravity manipulator.”

“I’m not a king,” the boy, Chuuya Nakahara, spat. “I just happen to have something no one else does: power. I’m simply fulfilling the responsibility I have.”

Chuuya paused, then looked down at Dazai and added, “You sure know a lot about the Sheep.”

“I got invited to join a while back. Obviously, I refused.”

“Ya made the right choice. I woulda killed you within the first five minutes.”

“I’d have assassinated you before that.”

Dazai met Chuuya’s glare. Chuuya then took a few steps back.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m still gonna kick ya to death in the next five minutes, regardless, so nothing changes. As if a little punk like you has any useful info anyway. I’m gonna send your head in a box to those Mafia sons of bitches. Consider it a declaration of war.”

“You won’t get that far.” Dazai didn’t move an inch. He simply stared quietly back at Chuuya. “Don’t you hear those footsteps?”

“Footsteps? What footsteps?”

All of a sudden, Chuuya was surrounded by angry shouting. “Don’t move!”

Numerous Mafia soldiers had their weapons aimed at him: rifles, pistols, submachine guns, machine pistols, and shotguns.

“Ha-ha.” Chuuya looked around. “Interesting. You’re a lot more popular than I thought. Wasn’t expectin’ anyone to come for your dumbass.”

“Give it up, boy,” Hirotzu demanded quietly from the back of the crowd. “You are far too young to find out what your organs look like.”

“Your threats don’t scare me, old man. Guns don’t work on me. I’m gonna kick all your asses and go home without a scratch just like I always do.”

Hirotzu calmly watched Chuuya. “This brings back memories,” Hirotzu began. “I had a similar phase when I was younger. I was rash and deluded, thinking I was invincible. I thought my brute strength alone could break the world to my

liking.” A faint smirk played on his lips. “Guns don’t work on you, you say? There is nothing special about that. Plenty of other skill users could say the same. At any rate...you’ve had enough warnings. Now it is time to repent. You’ll have plenty of time to rue your foolishness and ignorance in a pool of your own blood.”

Hirotsu’s shoes clicked audibly as he took a step forward. His gaze was more chilling than death itself.

“You’ve got powers, too, huh?” Chuuya’s eyes sharply narrowed. “I like the look in your eyes. You seem at least a little tougher than everyone else I’ve fought,” he said. “Come.”

He readied himself for battle, hands still in his pockets.

“Hirotsu... You should probably sit this one out.” Dazai winced with pain as he continued, “He can manipulate the gravity of anything he touches... Your skill’s a bad match.”

“Hmm... Gravity, you say?” Hirotsu replied as he removed the white glove on his right hand. It was a very elegant action as if he were royalty. “Then it is only fair that I tell you my skill, young Sheep. I can repel anything my hand touches.”

“Ha-ha! How kind of you to share,” Chuuya said with a laugh. “But don’t expect me to go easy on ya just ’cause you’re old.”

“No need.”

Hirotsu nonchalantly tossed his glove at Chuuya. The moment Chuuya knocked it away, Hirotsu was already right in front of him. He grabbed the boy by the collar with his left hand and pulled, but Chuuya didn’t resist; instead, he leaped off the ground and spun to dodge Hirotsu’s approaching right hand. He then launched a kick. Hirotsu pulled his right hand back and hit the bottom of Chuuya’s shoe with his palm. Their gravity and repulsion collided, creating a flash of light. Once again, Chuuya didn’t resist the impact. He flew backward and landed on his feet with feather-like gentleness.

“Man...wish I could say I’m impressed, but I’m just not feeling it. Your skill’s worthless against mine, old fart.”

Chuuya could manipulate the gravity of anything he touched. The Earth

maintains a constant gravitational force of one g, but Chuuya's skill allowed him to change the direction and force of the gravity of whatever he came into contact with. Meanwhile, Hirotsu's skill could only repel a target in the opposite direction by touching it with his right hand. There was a clearly superior skill of the two. And yet, Hirotsu didn't so much as bat an eye.

"No need to concern yourself, young one. When I was your age, I, too, believed that the stronger skill always won out. I was fortunate enough to realize my mistake before it cost me my life. That is why I pity you."

Chuuya sneered. "You've piqued my interest."

This time, Chuuya charged forward, hands still in his pockets, and threw a roundhouse kick. Hirotsu held out his right hand to stop it...until Chuuya changed the direction of his kick, aiming straight for Hirotsu's neck. Hirotsu promptly blocked with his pistol, which groaned under the weight of the heavy kick. A moment later, Hirotsu grabbed Chuuya's shoulder with his right hand.

"I've got you now," said Hirotsu.

"So what? Your skill won't work on me."

"I dunno about that," came a voice.

Chuuya looked back, clearly surprised. Dazai was standing right behind him. He placed a hand on Chuuya's neck.

"Sorry, but gravity is no longer yours to control."

Dazai's skill also activated when he touched his target. He had the power to halt and nullify all skills.

It was the ultimate anti-skill, no exceptions.

"I can't...use my powers?"

Hirotsu had his right hand on Chuuya's chest. "Now it's time to pay your tuition."

A white shock wave blasted Chuuya's small frame backward with such force that it looked like he'd been hit by a truck. Dazai was almost simultaneously knocked back as well, bouncing off the ground until he hit the plaster wall behind him.

“Dazai!”

Confusion briefly clouded Hirotsu’s face. He’d only used his skill on Chuuya; why did Dazai get knocked back, too?

“He got me...” Dazai groaned as he clutched his stomach. “He kicked me... right before we crashed...and I let go of him. He used his skill to fly backward.”

Chuuya landed sideways against the building behind him and grinned fiendishly. “Ha-ha-ha! Yes! That’s what I’m talking about! Nothin’ like a little fireworks to get the party started!”

And with a shout, Chuuya kicked off the wall so quickly and powerfully that he destroyed it in the process. He was like a cannonball charging straight for Dazai and Hirotsu. There was no way Hirotsu could block the attack with only his right hand; even if Dazai were to nullify Chuuya’s skill, the force of the crash would tear him apart. But at the very next moment...

...black flames blasted everyone backward.

“Gwah?!”

The black shock wave sent the entire group flying. And not just the people themselves—buildings, utility poles, and even trees were blown away, too. Everything on the surface was torn asunder, as if the air itself had suddenly lashed out.

It was a *black explosion*.

A massive explosion had just occurred near the center of Suribachi. But it was no ordinary blast—this was a colossal fireball large enough to swallow an entire neighborhood. Dazai’s vision spun while he flew like a dead leaf in the wind, and that’s when he saw it:

The glowing red eyes.

The face wrinkled from decades of death and destruction.

The white hair.

Standing cloaked in black flames was the devil himself.

“The previous boss...!”

Dazai's shout was swallowed by flames—and then his consciousness faded to black.

Phase.02

“Welcome to the Port Mafia, Chuuya Nakahara.” Mori was seated at his desk on the top floor of the Mafia headquarters.

They were in a dim, spacious room. The tinted windows blocked the outside from view. This was the Mafia leader’s office, one of the hardest, most difficult places in all Yokohama to break into. Wearing an amused smirk, Chuuya stood facing Mori in the center.

“What an honor to be invited. Heh.”

Chuuya’s arms were bound with leather straps while a massive chain used for towing boats was wrapped around his legs. His ankles were tied with construction-grade steel wire, which attached to metal fittings on the floor; his fists were tightly chained, as if to prevent him from ever opening his hands again.

Numerous red cubes surrounded his torso as well. It was a subspace skill that kept him from escaping.

The skill belonged to the guard standing next to him. But even with Chuuya restrained, the guard was still nervous. He was focusing every fiber of his being so that he’d be able to promptly act if Chuuya showed any signs of resistance. The man was an exceptional skill user, even within the Mafia, but he nonetheless looked uneasy.

“I heard you put on quite a show yesterday,” Mori said with a smile. “Apparently, you fought an entire group of my men single-handedly with the greatest of ease. Now I see why you’re the leader of the Sheep.”

“Too bad we got interrupted halfway, though. Ruined everything,” Chuuya replied with a smug look on his face. “Anyway, *that’s* also why you called me

here, right? About that black explosion—the black flames of Arahabaki.”

The door suddenly opened.

“Scuse me. Coming in... Oh?”

It was Dazai.

“Perfect,” said Mori. “I was waiting for you.”

“Ah! You’re that li’l twig from yesterday!” Chuuya practically leaped into the air. “You goddamn punk!”

“Oh wow. You seem to be doing well. I, on the other hand, got injured pretty badly, as you can see. Where does all that energy of yours come from anyway? Are you having a growth spurt? Or is that what’s happened to all the nutrients that were meant to make you smarter and taller?”

Dazai’s head was wrapped in bandages; his right arm was in a cast. All injuries he sustained fighting Chuuya and getting caught in the ensuing explosion.

“Leave my height outta this, damn it!”

“Fine... I suppose it’s pretty tasteless to criticize others’ shortcomings, after all. I promise I’ll never do it again, pip-squeak.”

“Why you...!”

“That’s enough.” Mori clapped his hands. “You two really hit it off for just having met a day ago. At any rate...yes, Chuuya, I would like to ask you about the explosion yesterday. Randou, could you leave the room for a moment?”

The skill-user guard with long, wavy black hair and unhealthy-looking bags under his eyes frowned. “I...cannot recommend that, boss. This boy is dangerous...”

“It’s fine. Dazai can nullify his skill if it comes to it. I already have other measures in place just to be on the safe side. More importantly, Randou, you look colder and paler than usual. Are you all right?”

Randou was violently shivering. “I am embarrassed to admit it...but I feel like I’m about to freeze to death...”

“You’re cold?” Chuuya cocked an eyebrow and glanced over at Randou.

“Wearing that? In this weather?”

Randou’s entire outfit was sturdily insulated from his felt trench coat to his thick scarf. He also had on rabbit fur earmuffs and tall synthetic leather boots made for the cold. And this was only what could be seen; lining his clothes were dozens of heat packs. But even then, he shivered as if he were smack in the middle of the arctic circle.

“I dressed lightly for the occasion so as not to offend the boss, but...brrr...it’s so cold...”

“Randou’s medical exam showed no signs of physical or mental illness,” Mori explained. “He simply hates the cold.”

“Brrr... I want to work somewhere warm... Boss, are there any Port Mafia branches near a volcano...?”

“Afraid not.”

“Mn... I’ll be taking my leave, as you wish...”

Randou released his skill, causing the many cubes of subspace restraining Chuuya to disintegrate. He then staggered dreadingly out the door, the other three watching him leave.

“Believe it or not, he’s a Port Mafia sub-executive and an exceptional skill user,” Mori hastily remarked.

“Nobody asked ya to make excuses for him...,” Chuuya muttered.

“Mori, do you think you can speed things up and cut to the chase?” Dazai asked, rolling his eyes.

“Ah yes...” Mori scratched his cheek with his fountain pen. “Of course...,” he said vacantly. He looked up at the ceiling, then over to Dazai, then to Chuuya, and then at his palm. After a few moments, he continued:

“Chuuya, how would you feel about working for us?”

There was a loud roar as jagged fissures shot through the floor around Chuuya.

“...Excuse me?” came what sounded like a voice straight out of the depths of

hell.

It was Chuuya's voice. The reinforced, bulletproof flooring shattered, pieces of it scattering about the room. And yet, neither Mori nor Dazai batted an eye. They remained expressionless.

"You made me come all the way over here just to listen to you talk outta your ass?" Chuuya growled.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised by your reaction." Mori watched Chuuya as if he were reading unfavorable results from a medical exam. "But from what I can see, we are essentially after the same thing. Perhaps you might consider what we can offer each other before giving an answer?"

"Ha-ha. Hilarious. I had no idea the Mafia's new boss enjoyed wastin' people's time like this." Chuuya sneered, baring his teeth in the process. He looked like an animal ready to tear Mori to shreds. "You want *me* to join the Mafia? Don't tell me you forgot what your organization did to this city."

"You're referring to our previous boss's atrocities, yes? I, too, am pained by what he did," Mori replied. It was difficult to read his expression.

His predecessor's bloody tyranny had plunged Yokohama into violence and terror, and the tragedies that occurred under that man's reign were still fresh in everyone's minds.

One day, a young redheaded boy was killed simply because he'd scribbled on the boss's car. Another day, the residents of an entire housing complex died when their water tank was poisoned on the off chance that a rival organization's executive was hiding there. And on yet another day, the previous boss issued a citywide notice that anyone who spoke ill of the Port Mafia would be put to death and anyone who reported such talk would be rewarded. The entire city spent the next several years engaged in a witch hunt with everyone suspicious of one another. Yokohama became a city of traitors; over a thousand people were executed, many of whom were apparently known at the time to be innocent.

Opposing the Port Mafia meant death. Disagreeing meant death.

The merciless tyrant of the night and his army of death—that was what

people called the Port Mafia.

“But the man is dead. I cared for him when he was sick and on his deathbed,” said Mori. “If there is such a rumor that this tyrant has come back to life, wouldn’t you want to know if it’s true, to help you sleep at night?”

Chuuya fixed Mori with a piercing glare for a few moments before responding:

“That still doesn’t give you a good reason to push me around, Doc. There’s plenty of nasty rumors about you going around as well. Like how your predecessor didn’t die of illness, but you actually killed him...which you obviously did. Nobody with half a brain would ever believe the old leader spent his final moments making his personal physician the next Mafia boss. If I’m wrong, then prove it. Prove right now that you don’t have an insatiable lust for power—that you’re not just somebody who wants to become the next grim reaper. You can’t, right?”

Mori’s assassination of the previous boss was top secret even within his own organization. Only Dazai knew the truth.

“You’re right. I can’t prove it,” Mori said with a shrug. “Because...”

Dazai looked at Mori and instantly noticed a change in his expression. He immediately opened his mouth to tell Mori to stop, but before he could, Mori finished his sentence:

“Because I *did* kill my predecessor.”

The temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. Chuuya was speechless for the first time since he’d been there.

“I slit the great leader’s throat with a scalpel and made it look like he died from illness. What about it?”

Mori’s voice was completely calm. Neither his posture nor his expression had hardly changed, but he somehow seemed like a different person. Even Chuuya, who had never lost a fight in his life, was taken aback. There was no warmth in Mori’s eyes. His mere presence was as cold as ice. The man on the other side of the desk was a demon who devoured other demons—a grim reaper who slaughtered his own kind—evil incarnate. The stench of countless deaths

seeped from his pores.



“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Chuuya’s voice was stiff. “He’s just a timid doctor, they said... You make that old man you killed look like an unruly kid.”

“I appreciate the compliment.” Mori smiled gently, as if he were talking to one of his patients. “Chuuya, forget what I said about you working for me. I’d like to ask that you work *with* us. The rumors we’ve heard about the prior leader’s resurrection and this Arahabaki you’re after are clearly connected. I believe simply sharing what we learn could benefit us both. Don’t you agree?”

“...And if I refuse?”

“Then I’ll kill you,” Mori replied as if it was as trivial as putting a sugar cube in his coffee. “However, that would require tremendous effort and resources. That’s why we’ll simply kill all your friends—all your Sheep—instead. How does that sound?”

Chuuya’s restraints flew off his arms and legs, embedding themselves in the walls and ceiling. His skill alone didn’t remove the chains but his brute physical strength as well.

“You’re dead!” he screamed.

Chuuya leaped forward, closing the distance between him and Mori in the blink of an eye as he threw a punch...but his fist stopped right before his opponent’s smirking face. Mori was holding a black communicator.

“Hey...Chuuya! Help! You’re there, right?”

A boy’s voice could be heard coming from the earpiece.

“The Port Mafia’s got us surrounded! C’mon, hurry...! Do something—anything—just like you always do!”

Mori suddenly pressed a button and switched the device off. Chuuya’s clenched fist was trembling.

“It was extremely simple, to tell the truth. They may be armed, but they lack finesse.” Mori shrugged. “The Sheep... An organization laying claim to Yokohama’s prime territory, hell-bent on retaliation... But aside from you, they’re just a bunch of kids with guns. A peculiar group, indeed.”

Chuuya’s fist trembled even more, but he kept it in place, showing no sign of

moving. He didn't have a choice, after all.

"As a leader myself, I know exactly how you feel, Chuuya. Who knew that the mighty armed force known as the Sheep was merely an all-powerful king and the hangers-on who can do nothing except rely on him for their survival? It appears you need all the management advice you can get, which means I have far more to offer than you do."

"...You bastard," Chuuya muttered through clenched teeth.

"What's with the fist? Getting in some exercise?"

Mori calmly prodded Chuuya's raised fist. The tension remained for the next few moments until Chuuya slowly lowered it.

"Well, there you have it, Dazai," Mori said, smirking. "Chuuya is the most violently powerful person in this room. But in the Mafia, violence and brute force are merely a couple of tools at our disposal. Our true strength lies in controlling rational action by any means necessary. In this case, the disadvantage of opposing me outweighs the advantage. Just some food for thought."

"I guess I see what you mean, but what are you lecturing me for?"

"Good question."

Mori wore an ambiguous smirk as he stared at Dazai. Chuuya listened to their conversation with the look of a hungry beast. But he still didn't make a move.

"'A disadvantage that outweighs the advantage,' huh?" he growled, glaring at Mori. "We can trade info...if it benefits me. But you two have to go first. I'll decide what to do after that."

"Very well," Mori replied with a smile. "First, our objective: We're investigating a rumor that my predecessor has come back to life. Dazai learned of three eyewitness accounts over these past two weeks, each claiming the boss was in Suribachi. His fourth appearance was when he blew you two away with those black flames. It feels somehow connected. Do you know anything about that?"

Chuuya met Mori's gaze with a piercing stare for several moments before

simply replying:

“The dead don’t come back to life.”

“I agree. That would put doctors out of business otherwise. However...the evidence seems to tell a different story. Take a look at this.”

Mori unlocked his desk drawer and took out a video player about the size of his palm. He placed it on his desk and turned it on, and the device instantly started playing a bird’s-eye view of a room lined floor to ceiling with stacks of thick wads of cash.

“This is surveillance footage from the Port Mafia’s vault, where we store half our hidden assets. It’s the most difficult room in our headquarters to break into, aside from this office,” Mori explained. “Watch what happens.”

Mori pointed to the screen. A shadowy figure was slowly weaving between stacks of bills. The moment Dazai recognized who it was, he gasped.

“That’s impossible...”

The shadowy figure looked up at the surveillance camera.

Floating in midair was an elderly man in tattered black clothes, eyes aflame: the merciless tyrant of the night. The old man—the late leader of the Port Mafia—looked up at the camera as if he knew exactly how Dazai and the others were watching, then announced:

“I have risen.”

His deep voice crackled bizarrely. It felt as if the room got colder, even though the sound was only coming from the device.

“I have risen from the raging flames of hell. Do you know why, Doctor?”

The previous leader’s body was faintly flickering on the screen, not giving a clear image of him. The outline of his body wavered like a shimmering heat.

“It is anger—fury born from resentment. Wrath is what it devours. It summoned me back from the pits of hell to have me create even more wrath. The black flames—the powerful divine beast Arahabaki is the very embodiment of rage itself. I will fulfill its wishes and have my revenge as I sow even more anger. Tremble in your bed as you try to sleep, and regret ever killing me.”

Massive flames gushed out of his body, instantly igniting the stacks of bills and melting the finish off the walls. Then the screen suddenly went black. The footage stopped there. Several moments passed before anyone could manage to utter a single word.

“This is all the footage we have of him,” Mori explained as he turned off the device. “The only ones who know it exists are the head of security, one executive, and myself. I have a very strict gag order in place. But even that might not be enough. There’s no guarantee that the former leader isn’t going to repeat the same performance elsewhere.”

Dazai stared at Mori with a stiff expression. “What are you going to do if he gives an encore somewhere else?”

“I have a good idea of what would happen. In this footage, he made it clear that his death was not by illness but by assassination. If any of his supporters were to find out, a third of our organization would turn on me. Win or lose, the Mafia would be done for.”

Dazai stared at the black screen in silence, seemingly deep in thought.

“Chuuya, I hear you asked Dazai about Arahabaki the first time you two met. What is Arahabaki?” Mori asked.

Chuuya glanced at him but didn’t say a word.

“I did a little research myself,” Mori went on. “Legend has it that Arahabaki was a servant deity, the god of *habaki*—leggings made from plant fiber. A god ancient enough to predate Japanese mythology, which is why its exact origins remain unclear. Apparently, nobody even knows how its name was originally written. As such, there are numerous variations of Arahabaki according to local legends across the country.”

“Do you seriously believe in gods?” mocked Chuuya.

“No. I believe only what I have seen for myself...which is why I cannot deny that the man in the footage looked exactly like the previous boss. You saw so for yourself.” Mori shook his head. “It’s no coincidence that you’re looking into Arahabaki. My guess is you heard the same rumors we did and decided to find out the truth. Am I wrong?”

Chuuya quickly darted his eyes around the room in hesitation before finally saying, “Who knows what’s true? We get a lot of drifters. There’s no way to pin down where the rumor started. But anyway...do you know where Suribachi came from?”

“The city?” Mori raised an eyebrow, surprised by the unexpected question. “It was built within a crater formed from a massive explosion toward the end of the conflict. The cause of the explosion remains unknown—”

“It was Arahabaki, supposedly.”

Chuuya grimaced.

“Lots of Sheep are into gossip, see... Rumor has it that eight years ago a captured foreign soldier was tortured at a secret military base near the Settlement. The torturer accidentally killed him, but the dead soldier’s rage and hatred summoned Arahabaki along with the black flames. Incidentally, they say in order to summon Arahabaki from hell you gotta kill a ton of people and collect their souls, then die consumed by anger. That’s the only way.” He went on. “Regardless, the resurrected soldier killed the torturer he despised. More specifically, he blew up the entire military facility along with all its soldiers. And that explosion created—”

“Suribachi,” Mori cut in. “I see.”

“Yeah. But Arahabaki’s power is too great to be contained in one person, so the soldier eventually lost his mind and turned into an uncontrollable monster. They say flames consumed his body along with the ground under him till there was nothing left.”

“Hmm. The return of an angry god... What do you think, Dazai?”

“About what?” Dazai shrugged. “It’s impossible. Grudges beyond the grave? Souls? Yeah, right. Someone’s just making stuff up for a cheap thrill.”

Mori’s expression turned serious as if he was deep in thought. “Nonetheless...,” he said, “my predecessor did kill a lot of people, and he did die filled with anger. That much adds up. Furthermore, he clearly mentioned Arahabaki by name in the footage. No ordinary person would have been able to sneak past the vault’s top security.”

“Then the answer is simple,” said Dazai. “It’s a skill. Someone with a skill we don’t know about made that footage. All they had to do after that was take advantage of the rumors about Arahabaki and make it seem like the old boss came back to life.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To make people believe you assassinated your predecessor... and to destroy the Mafia.”

“*Sigh...*” Mori shook his head, an exhausted look on his face. “‘Death returns upon the murderer,’ as they say. Dazai, this is an order: Find who’s behind all this before they do the same thing they did in the video in front of my predecessor’s supporters. Got it?”

“I guess I can help. After all, they’d end up torturing me to death for being your accomplice if they ever found out,” Dazai replied, sounding slightly miffed. “We don’t have much time, though. I hope you’re sure about sending me alone.”

“I’m not.” Mori smirked. “Chuuya here is going to help you.”

““What?!”” the two boys shouted in unison.

“The hell is wrong with you?! You lookin’ to die?! I oughta—”

“No, no, no! Anyone but him! I’d—”

“—kick your ass, you—”

“—do so much better on my own.”

“—piece of shit!”

“Stop shouting over each other,” Mori interrupted. He eyed them both. “Chuuya, I trust that you understand you are in no position to refuse.”

“Oh, come on, Mori, that’s—”

“Don’t get cocky, ya damn octopus!”

“—downright dirty!”

“Screw you!”

“Yes, yes.” Mori simply smiled and refused to engage as they yelled back and forth. “I have several reasons for pairing you up. First, someone outside of the Mafia will have an easier time investigating these rumors given how dangerous they are to the organization. In addition, I need someone to keep an eye on Chuuya so he doesn’t betray us. That’s where your nullification skill comes in, Dazai. And the last, most important reason is...”

Dazai and Chuuya leaned forward, wondering what it might be. However, Mori spent the next few seconds letting the words sit on his tongue before grinning and saying:

“...a secret.”

“The hell?!”

“Simply consider it a grown man’s intuition.” Mori’s lips curled into a mysterious smirk. “Get along, you two. That’s an order. If I hear you’re neglecting your duties because you can’t make nice... Well, no need for me to explain, yes?”

Mori slowly smiled at the pair once more. An invisible chill swept through the room.

“So? Do you understand?”

Silence.

“Do you *understand*?”

““...Yes,”” the two teenagers answered miserably.

“Good. Then go. I’m expecting great things from you two.”

Mori watched quietly as Dazai and Chuuya shoved each other back and forth on the way out. The door eventually closed, leaving Mori alone in his office. A silence like the ocean after a storm settled over the room. His eyes still on the door, Mori muttered to himself:

““Only a diamond can polish a diamond...””

He reminisced fondly.

“That saying you taught Fukuzawa and me that day is about to be put to the

test, Professor Natsume.”



A pale blue sky hung over Yokohama that day. It was perfect—almost anyone would want to take in a deep breath just looking up at it. But some felt differently. The sky was too clear. When the flames of destruction scorched this land, that same sky would be drenched in black smoke. And that black smoke would start to rise at any moment.

Dazai and Chuuya had very reluctantly started this investigation together. Their goal: find the spark that would create the black smoke and extinguish it. They didn’t have much time left.

The pair headed down an alley on that quiet, sunny day. They were scowling, not talking to each other, making sure to stay a good fifteen feet apart. Dazai was in the front, Chuuya was behind him. Surely, no one would think they were traveling together with this much distance between them.

“...Hey,” Chuuya muttered softly.

Dazai didn’t reply. He didn’t even turn around.

“...Hey, I’m talkin’ to you,” Chuuya repeated. “Tell me where we’re going.”

“Gosh, the weather is really nice today. In fact, it’s so nice, I think I can hear a little fairy talking to me.”

“Aw, piss off. You know it’s me.”

Dazai looked back. “Oh, how long have you been there? Do you think you could leave me alone? I’m kind of busy breathing right now.”

“I’m about to rip that head right off your body, mummy boy,” Chuuya growled. “Anyway, forget it. Just tell me where we’re going.”

“Fine, you win. But would you mind keeping your distance? I don’t want anyone to think I know you.”

“Don’t worry. I feel the same way.”

“Hee-hee. Look at us getting along so well. That’s what makes me love you!”

“The hell?! Quit that! You’re making me sick!”

“...Yeah, I felt pretty sick myself after I said that,” Dazai grumbled remorsefully. Without looking back at Chuuya, he continued, “What was your question again? Oh, right. You wanted to know where we’re headed. We’re going to investigate. I thought we should start asking people who saw the explosion up close about what they witnessed.”

“You wanna interview people? Ugh... I thought we were gonna kick some ass, make the enemy spill their guts.”

“Well, you were wrong.” Dazai shot Chuuya a look of disgust.

“What are we even investigating the explosion for?” Chuuya demanded. “Why not focus on eyewitness accounts of the old boss?”

Dazai stared at him for a few moments before replying, “Because we aren’t tracking rumors about the old boss. We’re tracking rumors about Arahabaki itself. If the resurrection was a fake created by some sort of skill, then that means a skill user is pretending to be Arahabaki. No matter how perfectly they’re pulling off the act, they can’t just stop eating, breathing, going about their usual life. That’s what we’re after.”

Chuuya frowned. “But...my guys in the Sheep already looked into rumors surrounding Arahabaki. Like, a ton.”

Dazai grinned. “Just because they love gossip doesn’t mean they’ve gotten to talk to *everyone*.”

He faced ahead once more, kept on walking, and continued, “A week ago, there was an explosion just like the one we experienced. Same place in Suribachi, too. It took me a while to realize since nobody mentioned seeing the previous boss there, but that explosion was likely caused by the same thing we’re investigating. We’re going to talk to a survivor of that explosion.”

“‘A survivor’? You mean there were casualties?”

“Yeah. A whole group of Mafia members, and only the skill user survived. You’ve already met him once. His house is right over there. He should be expecting us—”

The moment Dazai pointed down the alleyway, an earthshaking roar erupted from that same direction.

“Ah?!”

Startled, Chuuya promptly looked at where the noise had come from.

“Oh, great...” Dazai was clearly annoyed. “That was an explosion we just heard.”

The blast occurred at a nearby mansion. Black smoke rose from the building, and the sound of gunfire could be faintly heard as well.

“The hell? Didn’t you just say we were gonna go meet some survivor over there?”

“It looks like the enemy might have beaten us to the punch.”

“Seriously? That’s definitely not good. Oh, man.”

Dazai looked at Chuuya, who was positively brimming with excitement, contrary to Dazai’s expectations.

“Guess that means we’ve gotta forget about that boring interview you wanted and go kick some ass instead, eh?” said Chuuya.

“...What?”

“All right! Time for a beatdown! C’mon!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Chuuya dashed off like the wind. Dazai simply watched blankly.

“...What a child...”



Over half the ivied European-style mansion had been destroyed. The right half was a very well-kept, old-fashioned manor while the left half was a mountain of black rubble. Embers sizzled in the debris as ashy smoke rose into the sky.

The mansion was in a man-made forest separate from the residential section of town, so there didn’t appear to be any injured people or onlookers.

There were, however, seven or eight armed men facing the building with their pistols drawn. Gunshots echoed every moment or two.

“Looks like it’s already started,” Dazai observed from within the forest’s

shrubbery. “The explosion sure did a lot of damage. If only I’d been in the middle of that, I would’ve had a quick and painless death...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll beat ya to a pulp as many times as you want later, so focus on the mission right now, okay?”

Chuuya shot Dazai a reproachful gaze, then looked back to the mansion. “The place is under attack by an armed militia. They’ve got eight outside, but who knows how many inside.”

The instant Chuuya finished his sentence, one of the building’s gypsum-plaster walls on the second floor exploded and an armed man came flying out. It seemed as if someone had ejected him from the building.

“Oh... Yep. A few guns aren’t gonna help them against Randou’s powers,” Dazai said at length.

“Randou?”

“He’s a skill user with the Mafia. We were supposed to meet today. Remember the guy in winter clothes who restrained you in the boss’s office? That’s him.”

“Oh, that guy.” Chuuya frowned. “Wanna go save him?”

“Well, we first need to find out who this armed group is working for and the scale of their operations...”

All of a sudden, Dazai and Chuuya heard someone behind them raise a gun.

“I could tell you that,” came a man’s voice—a gentle voice, like the kiss of death. “Hands in the air and turn around.”

Dazai and Chuuya exchanged brief glances before raising their hands and turning to face the man. He was wearing a charcoal-gray military uniform. A burly figure, like a massive tree that had come to life, he had his pistol aimed at Dazai.

“Hmph. Just a couple of kids,” the man barked in surprise. “I thought the Mafia called for backup. Are they that short-staffed? Or is this Randou guy just not very popular?”

“W-w-w-we’re so sorry! We’re just...some kids who live in the neighborhood!”

Dazai's voice was trembling with fear. "We were delivering something to Randou's house, but when we got here—"

"Hey, Gramps," Chuuya shouted with glee, cutting off Dazai midsentence. "Let's save each other some time. First, you shoot me, then I'll knock you all the way into the next town over. I'll kick the rest of your buddies' asses, too, while I'm at it. And then, bam, we're done. What do you say?"

"What?" The man aimed his pistol at Chuuya next.

"...Ugh." Dazai stopped trembling, buried his face in his hands, and shook his head. "I had the guy completely fooled. We could have gotten some information out of him..."

"What's the matter? Ya don't shoot kids?"

Chuuya walked over until he was close enough to grab the man's gun, then looked up into the muzzle. "You oughta know not to judge a book by its cover if ya wanna survive in this world. You work for the GSS, right?"

The man grimaced. The GSS—the Gelhart Security Service—was an illegal organization at war with the Port Mafia. Formerly a respectable foreign-funded private security firm, they became a full-fledged illegal organization after their government subsidies got cut off. Now they were not only a security service but an engineer of danger as well. In the simplest of terms, they were pirates. They destroyed the ships of those who didn't hire them and stole the cargo on board. And yet, the GSS's security clients never had their ships attacked. This organization was both the problem and the solution, and their notoriety garnered more than enough publicity for them to win over customers.

Their side business led them to attack and steal from the Port Mafia a few times, which was why relations between the two groups were so hostile. And since the GSS's drill instructor was an actual soldier, their members were all highly trained fighters, which proved very problematic for the Mafia.

"Hurry up and shoot me," Chuuya taunted while placing the muzzle against his head. The man tightened his finger around the trigger, but he couldn't pull it. His gun started sinking.

"What the...? My gun's...getting really heavy...!"

“Don’t tell me you’re worn out already. You’re a man, right? It’s not *that* heavy.”

Chuuya then gently touched the gun. That alone made the lightweight pistol feel like a lump of iron weighing down the man’s hand. After that, Chuuya gave the weapon another gentle prod, which suddenly launched it into the man’s torso. The pistol buried itself inside the man’s bulletproof vest with the weight and power of a cannonball. His sternum cracked upon impact, and he let out an agonized scream, then stepped back and grabbed his chest. His pistol dropped to the ground with a faint clink—it had returned to its normal weight without Chuuya’s touch.

“A kid who can manipulate gravity... Don’t tell me you’re the Sheep’s Chuuya Nakahara?” the man moaned as he clutched at his chest. “So the rumors were true! You really did become the Mafia’s dog!” he shouted in rage as he raised his fist. He threw a reverse punch, twisting his hip to land the close-hitting blow.

“...Tsk.”

But before the military-grade punch could reach Chuuya, a black whirlwind slammed into the man’s chin. It was Chuuya’s hammer-like right heel; he’d jumped into the air and landed a lightning-fast roundhouse kick.

“I didn’t join the Mafia, damn it. Got that?”

The man lay flat on his back, unconscious from a concussion. It would be a while before he’d be waking up again.

“Impressive.” There was hollow applause. “What speed. You threw a roundhouse kick after he threw a straight punch, and you were able to hit him first.”

Chuuya was capable of manipulating the gravity of not only things he touched but his own body as well. He could decrease the force of gravity on his body to make himself lighter, thus speeding up his attacks only to normalize gravity the instant before his strike landed. The result: a kick with the swiftness of a feather and the weight of an iron ball.

“And all you did was watch like a little wimp, mummy boy.”

“Unlike a certain schoolboy who likes to show off how tough he is, I was

gathering information on the enemy from his communicator.”

Dazai had the gunman’s communication device pressed against his ear. He must have taken it out of his pocket.

“Apparently, the rest of his crew are heading this way after they heard the guy scream when you hit him.”

Around a dozen armed men appeared the moment Dazai finished his sentence. They slowly surrounded the two boys with their rifles aimed and ready to fire.

“Hey, bandages. I’ll kick their asses, so play me some background music. Somethin’ hard rock.”

“Did you hit your head as a child?” Dazai shot Chuuya a steely glare.

“Captain’s down! Our opponent is the gravity manipulator! Open fire!”

The men began firing all at once. Chuuya kicked off the ground practically at hyper speed. The battle had begun...if a one-sided beatdown counted as a battle, that is.

The enemies’ bullets were ineffective as Chuuya kicked one after another to the ground. The 7.92 mm bullets hit Chuuya, but they didn’t pierce his body. They simply bounced off him like wood chips, for the force of their gravity was immediately neutralized upon impact.

Chuuya kept low to the ground as he dashed forward like a wild animal, not allowing the bullets to slow him down. He charged into one of the armed men, who flew into the air as if he’d been caught up in an explosion. Chuuya landed on his opponent’s torso, then leaped in the opposite direction to throw a vertical ax kick on another nearby foe’s rifle, bending it in half. After reducing his weight to almost nothing, Chuuya kicked off the rifle and leaped back into the air. As he soared high into the sky, a bullet hit his shoulder, but Chuuya sent the bullet back the way it came, piercing through the enemy’s shoulder before burrowing itself into the ground. Sometimes, he was like a tornado; at others, he was like a comet crashing to Earth. Nobody could move quickly enough to follow him with their eyes, much less their rifle.

“Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Chuuya cackled in midair. His overwhelming speed and

reflexes dominated his opponents. Even Dazai had forgotten to breathe as he watched the storm that was Chuuya decimate the battlefield.

It wasn't long until there was just one enemy left. He was bleeding from the shoulder and glaring at Chuuya, who approached with bloodshot eyes. The man had already used his spare magazines and pulling the trigger only made light clicking noises in vain.

"It's over," said Chuuya. "Tell me why you guys attacked."

He slowly walked through the woods, taking his time to saunter toward his foe like a king.

"What do you know about Arahabaki? Why'd you go after one of the Mafia's sub-executives?"

"Damn it...! I won't let...a little brat like you...!"

The last enemy tossed his rifle aside and took out his backup pistol at his waist.

"Don't." Chuuya didn't bat an eye. "Put the gun away. You can't even hit me with an injury like that. You're playin' with your life."

"Die...!"

The gun went off. Chuuya went to deflect the bullet by manipulating its gravity...but he couldn't. He didn't need to. The man's injuries caused him to miss, and the bullet simply passed by Chuuya's head, hitting the large tree behind him before bouncing off the hard bark. The hollow-point bullet, which left the barrel moving hundreds of miles per hour, still maintained a decent amount of speed, even after ricocheting off the tree. The now-flattened projectile began spinning out of control. It headed straight back to the man who'd fired it before piercing his neck.

"Kah...!"

Unable to even scream in astonishment, the man collapsed to the ground. A gush of blood followed shortly afterward. It was an unfortunate accident but nothing unusual on a battlefield. After watching the entire event play out, Chuuya knitted his brow and lightly clicked his tongue.

“Tsk. You shoulda listened.” He turned around and began walking away. “That’s the last of ’em. Let’s go.”

Dazai didn’t say a word. He stumbled over to the collapsed man and crouched right next to his head. “You’re one unlucky guy. Does it hurt?”

Dazai’s expression was calm, but there was a faint twinkle deep within his eyes. The kind of twinkle a boy who wants to grow up to be a firefighter gets in his eyes when he sees his hero in the flesh.

“...Guh...”

“The bullet pierced your neck. It’s too late to save you now with a wound like that. But it’s still going to take around five minutes for you to die. You shouldn’t have used your gun.” Dazai shook his head. “Those five minutes are going to be pure hell. I wouldn’t be able to handle it. What do you want to do? Do you want me to end your suffering with this gun?”

The man groaned painfully. He was trying to say something, but he couldn’t get the words out.

“I’m doing work for the Mafia. That means I’m your enemy. But you’re showing me something extremely valuable—your death—so I want to pay you back. Now, if you want me to kill you, you should ask while you can still talk.”

The man’s eyes shimmered with despair. “...Me... Shoot...me...”

“All right.”

Dazai stood up and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck the man’s head, rendering him just another inanimate object.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Dazai fired once more. And again. He repeatedly shot the body until it started bouncing up and down.

“Ha-ha-ha. What a luxury. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Quit that, you idiot.”

Chuuya grabbed the gun and stopped him. Dazai, clearly bewildered, looked at the gun, then at the body below him, and then at Chuuya.

“He’s already dead,” said Chuuya. “Quit shooting his corpse.”

Dazai was puzzled. His expression was bizarrely childlike—fit for a boy his age, yet unlike any he had shown before. His lips suddenly curled into a gloomy smile.

“You’re right. When you’re right, you’re right. That’s the most normal reaction to have.”

He then tossed the pistol to the ground like a piece of trash before walking away, as if he’d grown bored with both the corpse and Chuuya. His expression was back to how it normally was: lifeless and utterly disinterested.

“Ha-ha. ‘Normal.’ Ha-ha-ha.”

Dazai’s hollow laughter filled the cluster of trees, vanishing into thin air.



“Brrr... So cold. The draft makes it three times colder... I wish I could turn into a cicada nymph and live the rest of my years underground, where there’s no wind...”

The sub-executive Randou was shivering on the mansion’s second floor. The interior was in ruins. The explosion had caused parts of the wall to peel off, and the ceiling lights had collapsed into pieces. Various decorations had fallen from the shelves and shattered across the floor, which was now a vibrant sea of blue plates, moss-green books, and orange paintings. To make matters worse, the decorations mingled with the enemies’ corpses, and their red blood somehow tied it all together like an abstract work of art.

“Rough day, huh, Randou? Here, I got you some wood for the fireplace.”

“Mn... Thank you, Dazai. I’m so glad this mansion has a fireplace. I would have probably jumped into the fire to warm myself up otherwise.”

Randou, wrapped in a blanket, took the scrap of wood Dazai handed him and tossed it into the fireplace. The flames powerfully roared like an incinerator.

“Yo, bandages, where’d you find that wood?”

“It was one of the building’s studs,” Dazai answered nonchalantly.

He and Chuuya were talking to Randou in what was left of the living room. Randou, a relatively senior Mafia member, had been working there since the prior boss was in power, but he didn't get promoted to a sub-executive until Mori took over. He was treated rather poorly during the prior boss's reign, so it seemed clear that he was either pro-Mori or at the very least supported the current system.

"I have a good idea why you were attacked, Randou," Dazai said as he picked a random book up off the floor and threw it into the fireplace. "It was to get people talking—spread more rumors. If a Mori supporter like you died in the explosion, people would start taking the previous boss's rage even more seriously. I checked the GSS captain's vehicle on our way here and actually found instructions for how to stage a black explosion."

"A 'black explosion'...?" Randou asked, shivering.

"I don't really get how it works myself. We'll need a specialist to look into it later for us. But the GSS men were apparently going to use the chemicals in sodium lamps to create a flame reaction that makes fire look black," Dazai explained while looking at the manual he'd found. "Regardless, it was a really cheap attempt. Not only did they fail to kill you, the entire group got annihilated."

"Lemme get this straight." Chuuya leaned to his right and placed a hand on his hip. "These GSS guys tried attacking this man here, pretending to be Arahabaki in order to get the Mafia to turn on itself, but failed?"

"That's it."

"Then the GSS leader is behind all this?"

"It's highly possible."

"Mn... Brrr... The current leader of the GSS is a cold, calculating skill user... They say he also has close ties to the Guild, a top secret North American organization... It's safe to assume getting rid of him would be no easy task," Randou said before adding, "Dazai, some more fuel for the fireplace, please..."

"Here you go." Dazai handed him an expensive-looking painting. "We don't need to dispose of him, though. Our mission is to prove that the previous boss

hasn't actually been resurrected...which is why I have some questions for you."

"Brrr... Go ahead. I couldn't possibly refuse someone with a Silver Oracle. And regardless, I wouldn't be where I am today without Mori's help. I owe him everything."

"Glad to have you on board. Now do you think you could tell me what you know about Arahabaki? I want to know in detail what you saw in Suribachi. It's our only lead to finding out who's behind all this."

"Oh yes... I remember it vividly." Randou tucked his chin under the blanket, then said softly, "I could never forget that day."

"Randou?"

Dazai looked at him, for Randou's hands were trembling, and he could immediately tell it wasn't from the cold.

"I survived...but all my men...were reduced to ash in the fire—in those black flames. Dazai, your strategy is sound. You only want to expose the conspiracy, not kill the person behind it... That's exactly what you must do. Because that truly was the work of a god. It doesn't matter how many people get together to fight it. It cannot be defeated."

Randou's frigid eyes burned with undeniable fear. No one, let alone Dazai, had ever seen him this frightened before. Randou was an impressive figure; seeing hundreds of corpses in a battle didn't make him so much as flinch.

"Tell me everything you know, Randou," Dazai said with a gentle smile. "This is getting interesting."

Randou cleared his throat, looked gloomily back and forth at the two boys, and told his story.

It happened almost right in the center of Suribachi.

We Port Mafia were fighting the Sheep gang. The Mafia engaged them in hostilities that day; the Sheep had destroyed a passenger aircraft with our men on it two days earlier because a week prior we'd attacked one of their warehouses since the month before they'd—*ahem*... At any rate, nobody remembers how it all started, but that was the gist of things. Real life isn't like a

film noir; there is almost no clear distinction between the cause and effect of good and evil. But surely that goes without saying.

Brrr... So cold. Sorry, but could you do something about that draft? There should be enough rubble to cover the crack. Yes, right there. That should do. Thank you.

At any rate, we were on our way to battle when we got caught in a black explosion. What happened to my mansion today is a mere trifle compared to what I saw. All the great men on my team were killed. I only managed to survive thanks to the subspace I created with my skill.

No words can describe the state of things that day. At the very least, it wasn't something of this world. The black flames, the boiling earth—the houses instantly melted, the air burned, and the telephone poles turned into ash before even hitting the ground.

Simply put, it was hell itself. The carnage was like something out of an ancient scroll painting of the underworld.

And there it was, in the middle of it all.

At the center of the blast wasn't the previous boss. It didn't bear the slightest resemblance; it wasn't even human.

A beast.

It was a pitch-black beast.

A quadrupedal beast made of flames: Its fur, its thick tail, and even its eyes were like the flames of purgatory. Its size and silhouette resembled a human crawling on all fours. But that was where the human similarities ended. More than anything, its very existence felt different. I suppose it seemed as if all disasters and genocides in history had been condensed into a physical form. Or maybe it was as if the energy that created the universe itself—the galaxies, the stars, this planet—had materialized into a single entity.

What I can say for sure, though, is that it bore neither malice nor anger. It had no emotions. It simply existed. I searched for a way to explain the phenomenon logically. I thought it could have been an enemy skill. But looking back, no single individual could have produced that much heat with a skill. And yet, there is no

other explanation for what happened. There were no skill users nearby; I couldn't find a thing. More precisely, there was literally nothing.

Everything in sight was shimmering in the intense heat. I couldn't even tell what color the sky was. It was as if someone had dumped water all over a watercolor painting. The entire world had turned into a specter. I strangely remember that only the sea in the distance retained its calm, steely surface.

The beast had annihilated everything but the ocean. Then it looked my way. It felt as if my organs were filled with melted lead.

And at the next moment, something unbelievable happened. The subspace created by my skill...started to crack.

No gun or sword—no storm, ray of light, or acoustic pressure—nothing has ever been able to damage alter-planar space. It's like how the protagonist in the novel in my right hand could never defeat the antagonist in the novel in my left hand; they're from different dimensions.

And yet, that beast did the impossible. It defied the laws of physics...which made me wonder: "Is this a god or a demon?"

I immediately created more subspace, but that brief moment was more than enough time for the beast to hit me with something I couldn't even see: a torrent of power—primitive energy before it transformed into something specific such as heat, light, or lightning. Perhaps the black flames are merely the aftermath of this primitive energy, like the rising smoke following an explosion. That was what hit me. It was beyond anything any skill user could ever do.

By the time I created the subspace, I'd already been sent flying. If I were even a second late, every cell in my body would have been destroyed. My body would have vanished from this world without a trace. It was probably sheer luck I got blasted back instead of trying to fight the beast.

One of the last things I remember before I lost consciousness was the beast's roar. Its voice was utterly devoid of any emotion or purpose. It terrified me.

But that wasn't its intention—it wasn't trying to threaten me. That was simply how it was. I immediately understood: By merely existing, it was going to cause destruction like never seen before. That was far more frightening than any war.

I flew through the air before skidding across the ground. I have no recollection of what happened after that. I was extremely fortunate to have been rescued and live to tell the tale, for if that beast had even a slight desire to kill me, I would've died instantly.

If someone told me that was a god, I would believe them.

Floods harbor no malice. Volcanoes harbor no malice. Neither do typhoons, thunderstorms, nor tsunamis. Yet, every one of these things kills scores of people in the blink of an eye. That beast was no different. In this country, they call such existences *kami*—"gods." And what else could you call that?

Randou fell silent, and neither Dazai nor Chuuya could utter a single word.

"I apologize... I understand that you two want to prove the previous boss wasn't resurrected by Arahabaki but by an enemy skill user. But if you tell Mori what I just told you...he would probably believe the god Arahabaki exists. I daresay it would make your investigation all for naught."

"No, it's fine. That was all extremely interesting." Dazai smirked. "I figured this whole thing out thanks to you."

"What do you mean?" Chuuya asked. He looked at Dazai, who twirled around theatrically and grinned.

"I mean I figured out who the real criminal was as well as the trick behind the act. Mystery solved."

Phase.03

Chuuya's and Dazai's fists collided.

"Tell me who's behind this!"

"No way!"

Chuuya swiftly closed in on Dazai without letting him finish his sentence, then unleashed a powerful downward kick. Dazai leaped into the air, evading the attack. He spun and used the momentum of his descent to swing his weapon down.

Chuuya raised his hands and blocked the black metal club, which was around the size of an adult male. The moment Dazai landed, Chuuya unleashed a flurry of punches.

"You really don't know who did it, do you?!"

"No, I do. Unlike a certain little schoolboy."

All Dazai could do was block the onslaught. He stepped back, retreating until he found himself trapped in a corner.

"Take this, and this, and this! You'll never win in a fight if all ya do is block!"

Chuuya chose a high kick for his finisher—a powerful move that would launch his opponent into the air. However, Dazai wasn't going to let this brief opening slip by.

"Ooh, too bad!"

He quickly pressed a button, making his on-screen character glow with energy. His metal club emitted a destructive beam of light that struck Chuuya's character.

"What the...?! Wait—!"

But Chuuya's shouting was drowned out by loud electronic sounds. The metal club kept swinging until countless rays of light filled the screen: attack, attack, attack, attack. The barrage of blows still didn't stop. All Chuuya could do was watch in utter disbelief until his character eventually fell face-first on the ground, and the word *VICTORY* appeared over Dazai's character's head.

"I guess that's that," said Dazai. "Did you learn your lesson?"

"Damn it! One more match!"

Dazai and Chuuya were at an arcade downtown. The electronic sounds were vibrant; the customers, loud. The pair were seated at opposite arcade cabinets playing a fighting game against each other.

"I don't mind playing another round, but you're still not going to beat me. I'm good with my hands, after all," Dazai boasted with a wave of his hand. "Anyway, it's time for you to keep your end of the bargain. Loser has to obey one command like a dog, no matter how humiliating it may be. Now, what should I have you do?"

"Damn it... I was so confident I'd win...!"

After departing Randou's estate, they found themselves with conflicting opinions. Chuuya insisted that they go straight to the enemy's hideout while Dazai argued that they should thoroughly prepare to make the job easier. Their argument further escalated when Dazai wouldn't say who was the mastermind behind the black flames. However, Mori had given them strict orders not to solve their problems through violence or threats.

Therefore, they picked what they deemed the fairest method of deciding things: arcade games. The loser would have to obey the winner no matter what.

They ended up playing close to a hundred matches, but that's a story for another time.

"You must've bought that confidence of yours out of the bargain bin," Dazai jeered, swinging from side to side in his chair. "You want to know why you lost? Because your skill is strong. It's so strong that you never learn to be cunning and strategic. You're stunted not only height-wise but mentally as well. That's why you can't win. Not in video games and not in a battle of wits, either."

“‘A battle of wits’?” Chuuya glared at Dazai. “I don’t remember agreeing to something like that, and I sure as hell don’t remember losing any argument! You just claimed you know who did it. As if I’m gonna believe that!”

“Understandable. But you still haven’t figured out who’s behind all this, right?”

“...Huh?”

“Did you? Or did you not?”

“What do you think?” Chuuya averted his gaze, grimacing. “...Course, I...”

“Hmm? What was that?”

“...know, but...like...”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“Of course I know who did it!” Chuuya snapped. “Stop actin’ like you’re so much smarter than me, ya twisted freak!”

“Ah, my apologies. Then let’s play a game. Whoever catches the perpetrator first wins. If you win, I’ll call off the bet we had. But if I win, you’re my dog for life.”

“Psh. You think you can scare me with a threat like that?” Chuuya eyed Dazai haughtily. “You’re only bluffin’ anyway. Whatever. Let’s do this. You think I can’t be crafty and strategic? Pfft. As if I’d show *you* what I’ve got up my sleeve.”

“That’s the spirit, little man. Quite a speech for someone who responded to cheap provocation. Here, let me give you some head pats.”

“Keep your filthy paws off me!”

Chuuya kicked Dazai’s hand away before he could touch his head. As always, he’d kept his own hands stuffed in his biker jacket the entire time.

“By the way,” Dazai suddenly added after observing Chuuya’s kick, “I still haven’t seen you fight with your hands yet. Even when you fought Hirotsu and the GSS, you only used kicks. Your hands are always in your pockets. Got a reason for that? Afraid of breaking a nail, perhaps?”

“Hell no. And who cares how I fight? It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Aha. I see. So you’re being sloppy on purpose.” A know-it-all look appeared on Dazai’s face. “There seems to be some sort of internal contradiction here...or perhaps conflict. You never know what’s going to happen in a fight between two skill users. Just like how you had the advantage against Hirotsu, perhaps there’s a skill out there that rivals even yours. And you won’t know until you run into it. That’s why in our line of work, you never, ever let your guard down during random encounters. Of course, I’m the exception, since I can nullify skills... So what are you thinking when you fight? Why are you putting yourself at a disadvantage?”

“Mind your own damn business.” Chuuya averted his gaze.

“Then I’ll rephrase my question. Why are you looking for this powerful deity Arahabaki?”

“Because...” Chuuya started to say something, but he froze.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Chuuya?”

Chuuya swiftly turned his back to Dazai, looked down, and pulled up his hood to hide his face.

“Don’t say my name!” he hissed in almost a whisper. “And don’t talk to me, either! Just quietly stare at the screen or something until they leave!”

“‘They’?”

Dazai looked around until he noticed two guys and one girl around their age at the entrance, surveying the arcade as if they were searching for something. There was nothing particularly unique about them; they were just ordinary kids one would expect to see downtown. Each one of them, however, had a blue band around their right wrist.

“Those blue bracelets they’re wearing... That means they’re members of the Sheep.”

Dazai stared at the three teenagers, then at Chuuya, who still had his back turned to him.

“Is there a reason you’re avoiding them?”

“You think this looks like a good time for me to run into them?!”

“Oh... Now I get it.”

Dazai put a thumb to his chin and pondered for a quick moment before a faint smirk made its way to his face. He then shouted:

“Come on, Chuuya! We’ve got work to do! Boss’s orders!”

“You piece of shit!” Chuuya squeaked furiously. The three teenagers’ faces lit up almost at once.

“Chuuya! Phew... We finally found you! We’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

The trio waved at Chuuya as he let out a deep sigh. He then put on a composed expression and walked over to them.

“Hey, guys. Looks like you’re all okay. Thank goodness.” He spoke in a mature voice. There wasn’t a hint of unease on his stony visage.

“What are you doing goofing off around here?” The silver-haired guy in the middle pouted. “You know that Akira and Shougo and the others got abducted by the Mafia, right?!”

“Don’t worry,” Chuuya replied impassively. “I’m taking care of it. I’ll get all eight of ’em back safe and sound.”

“You’re ‘taking care of it’? In an *arcade*...? They’re talking about you back home, y’know. They say you’re the Mafia’s errand dog now! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve been working to dispel those rumors? I—*ahem*. Fine, whatever. Just break into wherever the Mafia’s keeping them and kick some ass! Like you always do!”

Dazai’s eyes sparkled. He appeared to be quietly enjoying the Sheep’s conversation.

“First things first,” said Chuuya. “Hear any new rumors about Arahabaki?”

“Huh? Oh...” The silver-haired teen exchanged a troubled glance with his friends. “Of course, we’re looking into it. We’re tracking all the rumors and trying to find out where they’re coming from, but there’s been a lotta talk these past two weeks especially. Rumors about people seeing the black flames or the

old Mafia boss have been spreading like the plague. Before that, there were just lots of bits and pieces of information—barely even whispers...”

Dazai suddenly chimed in. “Then what’s the oldest verifiable rumor?”

Everyone stared at him.

“Yo... Chuuya? Who’s this guy? He lookin’ to join us?”

“Yeah...something like that.” Chuuya glared at Dazai, then returned his gaze to the Sheep. “Just tell him what he wants to know. Sorry.”

“Uh, fine...”

Although clearly not thrilled about the idea, the silver-haired teen looked back and forth between Dazai and Chuuya before explaining. “The oldest rumor of any definitive damage is probably the one from eight years ago: the giant explosion that created Suribachi City at the end of the conflict. There’s nothing about Arahabaki’s destruction before that.”

“I knew it...” Dazai nodded with a knowing look.

“Hey, Chuuya. Is this guy really a new Sheep member? You know you’re not allowed to bring new people in without approval first. I get that you’re the strongest and you contribute the most to the group, but you’re still technically just one of thirteen Council members. Doesn’t help that a lot of people already think you overstep your authority. Plus—”

“I know,” interrupted Chuuya in a deep voice.

“You do? ...Guess I shouldn’t worry, then. Who cares what the others are saying anyway? Everyone depends on you, and that’s the only thing that matters.”

The silver-haired boy lightly clapped Chuuya on the shoulder.

“Now, let’s hurry back and come up with a plan to save our friends. They got kidnapped on the factory road across the river. I was actually there too, but I managed to hide until the enemy left.”

“Hang on. You went to the factory road?” Chuuya asked sharply. “Did you go to steal booze again? This is war, ya know! And you got that close to the Mafia’s base?! That’s like begging to be kidnapped!”

“Quit yelling.” The boy frowned. “It’s not like we went to kill anyone. We’re only acting in self-defense just like the rules say. Besides, isn’t this our chance? The Sheep always get their revenge. You lay a finger on us—we pay you back double. Right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Chuuya, you’re always telling us that anyone who got dealt a different hand in life has a responsibility to fulfill. So you gotta use your powers to help us fix things!”

The silver-haired boy tried pulling Chuuya by the shoulder. “Now, c’mon! Let’s go!”

Clap. Clap. Clap. A sudden round of applause.

“I’m impressed.”

It was Dazai. His lips curled into a smile as he continued his leisurely clapping.

“You guys are fascinating to watch. Chuuya’s got all that berserk firepower, but here he’s like a sheep getting stared down by a wolf. It seems that leading an organization is more difficult than I’d ever imagined. Maybe I oughta give Mori a shoulder massage when I get back.”

“You little suicide-obsessed—”

“Listen, Sheep—you can’t take Chuuya with you. He has a job to do. Port Mafia’s orders.”

“Excuse me?” The silver-haired boy glared at Dazai. “You talking about the rumor? I literally just said it was bullshit. Plus, no way Chuuya would never submit to the Mafia...”

He looked over at Chuuya, but his leader’s heavy expression seemed to make him suspicious.

“Seriously?” the boy muttered, taking his hand off Chuuya. He then stepped back incredulously. “Chuuya, this is some kind of joke, right? Or part of a plan, at least? Like you’re trying to destroy the Mafia from the inside or something?”

“No, it’s true,” Chuuya replied firmly with a shake of his head. “The Mafia’s boss isn’t joking around. Outsmarting him ain’t no picnic, either. Doesn’t help

that I'm being watched."

"You're being watched?"

Chuuya stared pointedly at Dazai. After a few seconds went by, the Sheep appeared to realize what he meant and instinctively recoiled.

"By *this* kid...?!"

The three Sheep took a few steps back. Although they had clashed with the Mafia a few times before, this was their first time meeting someone who reported directly to its boss.

"Yep," said Dazai. "Nice to meet you all."

"Ch-Chuuya! What're you doing just standing there?! This guy works for the Port Mafia's boss, right? Kick his ass and tie him up! Then we can exchange him for— Wait. Actually, just kill him."

"Oh my. That took a dark turn." Dazai raised his hands playfully. "I give up. I can't take on four people at once. I'll do anything you want me to. Just please don't kill me. Hmm... Oh, I know. I could ask Mori to release the hostages."

"...What?"

Despite their bewilderment, Dazai took a cell phone out of his pocket, pressed a few numbers, and put it against his ear. "Hey, Mori? How goes it? That stomach ulcer still bothering you? ...Oh, I see. Getting bigger, huh?"

He sounded amused. "The job's going smoothly. We're just wrapping things up. About that—I actually wanted to ask you a favor. Do you think you could release the Sheep hostages? Uh-huh. Yep. Immediately. Unharmful. Don't worry. I'm doing things just like you taught me... All right. Later."

Dazai pressed a button, then stuffed the phone back into his pocket. "The hostages should be free now."

The Sheep exchanged baffled glances.

"Wait, wait, wait. You're telling me this punk has the authority to release hostages? *He* sounded like the one giving orders there."

The silver-haired boy still looked doubtful until he eventually checked his

phone, and his eyes opened wide.

“Hey...! He was tellin’ the truth! I just got an email saying everyone’s back home safe!”

The three Sheep rejoiced. Chuuya glared at Dazai questioningly.

“What are you scheming?” he demanded. “What was that?”

“A gesture of friendship.” Dazai wore a mysterious smirk. “Now, let’s go. We’ve got a job to finish.”

“Oh, you do? Ha!” The silver-haired boy laughed as if Dazai were an idiot. “Chuuya’s not gonna help the Mafia with any work. You lost your bargaining chip when you released the hostages!” He tugged at Chuuya’s arm. “C’mon, Chuuya. Let’s go! Everyone’s waiting for us!”

But Chuuya didn’t budge.

“...Hello?”

“Sorry, but you guys go back without me.” Chuuya shook his head.

“Huh? ...What’re you talking about?”

“I’m gonna capture the enemy.” Chuuya’s expression was stiff.

“But, like, you were just being threatened by the Mafia, right?” The boy wore a forced smile. “You’ve got a more important job to do now: revenge. It’s time to make the people who kidnapped Akira and the others pay. We already know who’s behind it: an assault group called Black Lizard. They’re strong, but they’re no match for you. Come on—we’re leaving.”

The silver-haired Sheep grabbed Chuuya’s shoulder and pulled, but Chuuya still didn’t move. Not even an inch.

“Chuuya, seriously. This is getting old.”

“Arahabaki comes before that.” It looked as if Chuuya had forgotten how to move the muscles in his face. “I already made a bet with this guy to see who’d find it first, and I’m not gonna let him win.”

“Who cares about some stupid bet?!” the silver-haired boy shouted. “What’s gotten into you? Seriously. Everyone’s waiting for you to give this enemy a

beatdown! That's the only way we Sheep can protect our turf! We've only made it this far because everyone knows they can't mess with us! And you're just gonna throw all that away 'cause of some stupid bet?"

"That's enough, little lamb," Dazai chimed in. "Chuuya can decide for himself how he wants to use his powers. And he found something more important than protecting you all. You should be happy for him."

The Sheep stared at Chuuya in disbelief.

"Chuuya, you can't be serious about this. We won't be able to fight back without you. Our turf's gonna get swiped before the week's over! Don't tell me that..." The silver-haired boy took a step back. "That the rumors were true? Did you betray us? ...You're really gonna join the Mafia if you finish this job, just like they're saying?"

"The Mafia has nothing to do with this. This is my own problem."

"Really? Then can you prove that?"

"He can't. All you can do is trust him," Dazai interjected once more. "Isn't that enough? You're friends, right? ...Now, come on. It's time for you to go."

After realizing there was no use in arguing, the three Sheep reluctantly left, occasionally looking back at Chuuya's unflinching expression.

"You better not forget who took you in when you showed up outta nowhere without a soul to turn to, Chuuya: us Sheep and no one else," the silver-haired boy said as he departed. "So fulfill what you were meant to do. Take responsibility for the hand you were dealt. You're the one who always says that, not us. This is the responsibility of someone who was dealt a good hand in life. Maybe you oughta think real hard about that one more time."

Chuuya didn't respond. He simply watched silently as the Sheep left him in their wake.

Phase.xx

“ ” existed in a sterile bluish-black darkness. There was no up or down, backward or forward. Even the flow of time was ambiguous. “ ” had no idea who it was or why it was there.

All was quiet, like the bottom of a well or the sea after a storm. “ ” was enclosed in that sticky bluish-black darkness.

Beyond the heavy darkness was a clear wall. “ ” knew instinctively that the wall was keeping it inside—that it was a seal. Nevertheless, “ ” didn’t know such a word, for language was a foreign concept. Because “ ” wasn’t even human. That was why it didn’t know the precise word. It merely understood the concept of the transparent wall.

“ ” was surrounded by a thick, transparent seal. As certain as an unbreakable promise, that seal blocked “ ” from the outside world.

From time to time, something would flicker on the other side. It would move from right to left, then left to right.

These were the silhouettes of people walking on the other side of the seal, but “ ” had no concept of humans. Some people would occasionally peer into the darkness while others would quickly walk by; others sometimes appeared to be pleading before the wall. However, the seal kept each person at a great distance. It was like staring at the ends of the Earth through a telescope.

But one day, that seal was destroyed.

The sacred realm had been opened, the darkness had been tainted, and the outside world had intruded. Someone was calling “ ”. A flurry of intense emotions hit “ ” like a tempest, and “ ” gasped for breath. It felt like drowning. “ ” had no interest in the outside world, but the outside world was not going to

let that stand.

A man's powerful hand grabbed on to " ", and reddish-black flames erupted from where it touched.

Those were the cries of a newborn.

Anyone born into this world must throw away what they once had. " " forgot who it once was and what it had felt in the darkness. They forgot that calm, bluish-black hue and gentle solitude. That darkness would no longer protect " ".

Those newborn cries filled the outside world in the form of flames. The raging flames brought destruction to the surface for as far as the eye could see.

And thus, " " was born.

Phase.04

“Could you place that ornament on the right near the ceiling? Yeah, right there. Just a little higher, please.”

Dazai was preparing for a banquet in a reception room within a shipyard building. The owner had gone bankrupt and was nowhere to be found, so the run-down shipyard became the perfect spot for illegal organizations to take root. The dock formerly used to repair ships was now a vacant lot while the three-story building that surrounded it had succumbed to disrepair and decay.

Inside the building were Dazai and Randou. What was once most likely a room decorated with expensive paintings and cushy leather chairs was now a decrepit hall full of broken glass and dotted with stains from a leaky roof. And Dazai was in the middle of redecorating this space exactly to his liking.

“Phew... I’m so excited. I bet Chuuya’s gonna be thrilled once he sees the huge party we’re throwing to celebrate his newfound freedom.”

He hummed a cheery tune as he hung a cloth garland on the wall. Even with his right arm in a cast, he was able to festoon the walls with one vividly colored decoration after the other.

“Oh, wow! This garland is so long! Worth every second put into preparing it. I bet I could cover every inch of the walls with this. Randou, here. Hold this corner for me. All these magnificent decorations are going to move Chuuya to tears.”

A high-quality rug of deep crimson was spread out on the floor while the sound system was playing upbeat, modern pop music popular with teen boys. Farther back in the room, there was a serving cart decorated with gold ornaments; atop it was a colossal cake that could feed twenty people and then some. Lights flashed alternating vivid colors throughout the dim room,

transforming it into the deep sea, the twilit horizon, and a luscious green forest every few seconds.

“I don’t know, Dazai... I get the feeling any normal person would want to kill you over a welcome like this...,” Randou remarked timidly as he helped put up the decorations.

“Why do you say that?” Dazai asked curiously. He was hanging the endlessly long crimson garland. “Everything about this screams ‘Congrats on being relieved from duty, Chuuya.’ Good snacks, good drinks, good music, smiling friends... What am I missing?”

“While I admit I may not know what’s popular among teenagers these days...I am fairly positive they don’t like pit traps, at the very least...”

Randou stared fretfully at the floor like a small animal. The pit in question was completely hidden thanks to the rug, which was right in front of the giant cake visible from the entrance—precisely where curiosity would lead anyone invited to come inside.

“Hee-hee-hee... It isn’t just *any* pit, though! First, his Sheep friends are going to applaud and congratulate Chuuya as he’s guided to the back, where he’ll step onto the pit and fall straight down. Of course, a petty trap like this isn’t even going to make him bat an eye because he’ll just kick off the ground and jump back out. Unfortunately for him, however, there is no ground below to kick off. What’s waiting for him at the bottom of the pit is a thick sludge that would drown even a pond skater, guaranteed. Even Chuuya would have a difficult time escaping it. And then...hee-hee-hee...the real guest of honor—forty pounds of flour—will come falling onto Chuuya’s head as he struggles to escape the mud. And I’m not talking a dusting like a little romantic snowfall. No—a *ton* of flour is gonna bury him from head to toe the moment he falls into the pit. Chuuya’s skill only works on things he touches, so even if he gets one layer of flour off his body, there will still be plenty more fine powder left over that’s not directly touching him. Eventually, he’ll have to focus the gravity around his mouth to keep from suffocating. Then, as he’s just barely managing to breathe, he’s gonna do the only thing he can to fight back: scream obscenities at me. And those screams will serve as background music for the party as I partake in the delectable spread. Ah...! I’m literally trembling with excitement!”

Dazai was grinning from ear to ear, his cheeks rosy with giddiness like a child the day before Christmas. Randou, on the other hand, was utterly aghast.

“Ah, um... Well...I did learn one thing today. You would make a fantastic torturer in the Mafia,” Randou suggested as he fought to keep his lip from twitching. “More importantly, how are you going to even get Chuuya to attend?”

“That’s the easy part. All I need to do is trick a few Sheep into coming here and make it look like a real party. I’m practically finished with that part, to tell the truth.”

“Ah yes... Now I see why you’re Mori’s right-hand man...”

“Mori always encourages us to do the jobs that nobody else wants,” Dazai gloated.

“This...wasn’t what he had in mind.”

Once he’d finished decorating, Dazai dusted off his hands and returned to Randou’s side. “Anyway, what’s most important is that Chuuya and his friends patch things up,” he added. “They’re basically a bunch of sparks in a powder keg. They just haven’t realized it yet. Neither Chuuya nor the Sheep have any idea that their entire defense system is awful. It’s like... What’s the best way to describe it? They’ve got their wires crossed? They’re unstable? Or perhaps the undercooked meat theory would apply here?”

“Uh... The *what* theory?”

“Mori taught it to me. Imagine three teenagers went to a yakiniku restaurant,” Dazai began as he stroked his chin. “Usually, you’d put the raw meat on the grill, flip it over when one side is cooked, then take it off and eat it once the other side is done. However, these are three growing teenagers with healthy appetites, so they’re stuffing their faces with the meat the moment it’s finished cooking. Every one of them wants to eat even more, though. It’s basically an all-out war. That’s when one of them has an epiphany. He’s going to grab the meat and eat it a few moments before it finishes cooking. That way, he can eat as much as he wants before the other two can even pick up their chopsticks. He gives it a try, and the plan goes exactly how he imagined. He gets to eat to his heart’s content. Now the other two are at a disadvantage. There’s

no point in coming to the restaurant if they can't eat as much as they want. Do they come up with a solution, though? Of course they do—the same one the first guy came up with. In other words, they also decide to eat undercooked meat. There are no other options. Once they all start eating undercooked meat, there is no turning back. If one person stops, he alone will end up with less meat than the other two. Therefore, each one of them is trapped, forced to eat the undercooked meat and nothing else, even though all three know that perfectly cooked meat tastes much better. And that's the undercooked meat theory. It explains at least half the misery in the entire world."

"I see... In other words, since everyone pursued what was best for them, they couldn't achieve what was best for the group... And furthermore, the one who came up with the strategy and caused this misery no longer had the means to fix it. Correct?" Randou tilted his head curiously. "And you're claiming this same situation can explain what is happening with the Sheep as well?"

"Hee-hee-hee... What's great about them, though, is that they don't even realize they're eating undercooked meat. Chuuya, the Sheep—what exciting little playthings they turned out to be. I never knew the underbelly of society could be such a thrill," Dazai gushed before snickering yet again.

"True... I suppose I can agree with you there," Randou replied, his hands held over a light for warmth. "Violence and war are not necessary for survival. If we all agreed to stop eating undercooked meat—in other words, if everyone agreed to stop fighting and banned all weapons—then violence would be no more. But that isn't realistic. No matter what, someone will break the rules to get ahead of the rest because that's always the most profitable option. Everyone else would have no choice but to eat undercooked meat—they would have to maintain their stance on fighting back only when provoked. You might say this is the true nature of conflict in the underworld."

"You probably know much more about that than me, since you've been in the Mafia for so long," Dazai argued, a faint smirk on his lips.

"Yes... I was a low-level grunt during the previous boss's reign," Randou said. He was now rubbing his hands together to warm them further. "I had no support, no financial backing. I was the dregs of the organization. My duty was to fight and die on the front lines. To some extent, my skill helped me to survive

those many battles, but I mainly have my good fortune to thank. After Mori became the new boss, he noticed my abilities and promoted me all the way to a sub-executive. That is why I feel eternally indebted to him. For his sake, I would dispose of any foe who stands in the Mafia's way. I intend to do everything I can in that regard, even against a foe as dangerous as Arahabaki."

"I'm counting on you." Dazai smiled.

"By the way, Dazai... You said you found out who's behind the Arahabaki ordeal. Is that true? Or were you simply lying to torment Chuuya?"

"Both!" Dazai laughed. "I brought it up in front of Chuuya so that he'd make a bet with me. But I really do know who's behind this."

"Oh? ...And who is that?"

"You, Randou."

Silence.

But it wasn't simply quiet. It was as if all sound had escaped the room.

"You impersonated the old boss and spread the rumors about Arahabaki," he continued. "Anything you want to say for yourself?"

Randou scratched his head in vexation. "Excuse me...? Uh... I... I'm terribly sorry, but...I'm not sure how to react here. I've never been called a criminal before."

"It's fine. Everyone's gotta start somewhere," Dazai said with a grin. "I'm feeling generous today, so let me tell you how a criminal would normally react. First, after being called a criminal, you would immediately say, 'That's ridiculous. I couldn't possibly do such a thing.' Or you might say, 'That's a really funny joke, Dazai.' Then I'd reply with 'But it's true. You *are* the criminal behind all this.' The criminal would then get heated and try to argue. 'Did you not hear what I just said? I told you I feel indebted to the boss. Why would I try to incite an internal conflict to destroy the Mafia?' ...Are we good so far, Randou?"

"Well...I suppose I have nothing to add. Besides, all that is true," Randou answered uncomfortably. "You said exactly what was on my mind. And...? What would your rebuttal be?"

“I’d say this: ‘Your debt to him means nothing, Randou, because attacking the Mafia isn’t your goal. The man behind all this has a different objective.’ So...? Think it’s maybe about time you took over from here?”

“Yes, I suppose... Although I’m still a little confused.” Randou scratched his head. “I don’t like being called a criminal, so perhaps I should take your claim seriously. Hmm... What evidence do you have? Because you have shown no—”

“No theoretical evidence that even suggests I am behind this other than simple speculation.” Dazai finished Randou’s sentence. “Exactly, Randou. *That’s* how you’re supposed to do it. Now...would I really accuse a sub-executive without any evidence?”

“Well, I suppose you have something, given how confident you are.” Randou sounded perturbed. “Something that seems like evidence to you—something that I cannot even imagine.”

“So you must be super curious, right? I feel bad for making you wait like that.” Dazai shrugged. “You made a mistake—an extremely basic error. I bet you’re going to hate yourself when I tell you.”

“And what would that error be?”

“The ocean,” Dazai declared with a wag of his index finger. “You said when you saw the black flames of Arahabaki, you could also see the ocean—that only the sea in the distance retained its calm, steely surface.”

“Yes...I did say that. Because that’s indeed what I saw. What about it?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to figure it out yourself?”

“Apologies, but I’m afraid I’m not following at all. Just tell me.”

“Fine.” Dazai nodded, smiling. “Your story took place in the middle of Suribachi, but Suribachi was turned into a hemispherical basin valley in the explosion. Which means...”

“Ah!” Randou suddenly exclaimed. “Ah yes...I see.”

“Exactly. There’s no way you could have seen the ocean. That massive valley is just over a mile wide, so you could stand on the tips of your toes and never even get a glimpse of it. Once I realized that, the rest was easy. So why did you

say you saw the ocean? The rest of your story was perfect and didn't contradict the rumors at all. Your description of Arahabaki was extremely convincing. And if you ask me, I do think you saw it: the ocean, that is. That's why you made that mistake. You saw the ocean from Suribachi a long time ago...long before the explosion eight years prior. In other words, you saw the calamity—the black explosion that created Suribachi and gave birth to the rumors of Arahabaki itself.”

Randou didn't respond.

Dazai quietly observed him for a few moments, then gently sighed. “That one gossip-loving Sheep said the oldest rumor about Arahabaki went back eight years ago to when that explosion created Suribachi. That incident was probably what started the rumors about an ancient god. Someone else must've witnessed it from afar. However, you witnessed the entire event close up. You were so close that any normal person would have been vaporized in the explosion. You described that memory with such accuracy that you accidentally mentioned the ocean as well. And now your motive should become clear once I learn why you had to describe that day so vividly.”

Randou, who had been listening in silence, sighed defeatedly. “You had a bet with Chuuya, didn't you?” he asked. “Well, it looks like you won. You found the perpetrator first.”

“Thanks, Randou.” Dazai beamed. “Now I have a dog that'll do whatever I say for the rest of my li—”

All of a sudden, something crashed through the wall and collided right into Randou.

“It was you!” a gruff voice shouted. “I beat that sly dirtbag! I win! You're the one who's behind all this!”

Randou had been thrown clean from the building and tumbled onto the ground outside. Standing over him was a small-framed boy.

Dazai blinked a few times. “Wow...”

“Sorry, man, but it's over.” The boy boastfully smirking was none other than Chuuya. “You can't fool me. I saw through your lies and— Ahhh?! What are you

doing here, you slimeball?!”

“I’d like to ask you the same question, pip-squeak,” replied an annoyed Dazai. “Just so you know, I already announced that he was the criminal before you got here. I was in the middle of explaining how he did it when you showed up.”

“Huh? You were in the middle of explaining...which means you still haven’t finished, right? Then it looks like I win. I defeated the mastermind behind all this. Which equals my victory. The strongest always win. That’s just how the world works.”

“It’s people like you who turn the world into undercooked meat,” Dazai said with evident disgust on his face. “Did the ocean convince you it was Randou, too?”

“The ocean?” Chuuya seemed puzzled. “The hell are you talkin’ about?”

“Huh? Then how did you know Randou was the mastermind behind all this?”

“It was obvious if ya actually listened to him. Every eyewitness mentioned they saw the old Mafia boss, but this guy said he saw Arahabaki itself. That’s *impossible*, though. That’s why I knew he was lyin’.”

Randou lay on the ground groaning in pain. “Does that mean...you decided I was the one behind this because you don’t believe gods exist?” he asked.

“Ha-ha. No. It’s the opposite. It’s ‘cause gods *do* exist,” Chuuya declared. “I know that for a fact. Which is why I know there’s no way you coulda seen Arahabaki in Suribachi.”

At that, Randou’s presence suddenly changed. His cold body stopped trembling. “You know...that Arahabaki exists?” he managed to ask.

“Yeah,” said Chuuya. “You saw it, too, right? *Eight years ago*. You wouldn’t have been able to describe it with such accuracy otherwise.”

“It’s true... I did see it,” Randou admitted as he sat up. “But I didn’t simply see it. I experienced the explosion up close. It came out of nowhere... I was severely wounded, hovering between life and death. The impact and the fire caused me to lose my memories. I wandered Yokohama until I caught the previous Mafia boss’s attention, and he invited me to join the organization.” Randou fixed

Chuuya with a heated gaze and added, “Chuuya, you know, don’t you? You know where Arahabaki is right now.”

Chuuya, however, didn’t answer. He simply stared back at Randou, a piercing look in his eyes.

“Tell me,” Randou demanded.

“I guess you would want to know, huh, Randou?” Dazai faintly smirked. “After all, that’s why you started the rumors. The only one who could see through the lies about Arahabaki is the person who knows the true Arahabaki. By describing it so vividly, you shined a massive spotlight on yourself in order to find whoever knew the truth, right?”

Chuuya quietly looked back and forth between them for a few moments before eventually shaking his head.

“*Sigh...* Why do you wanna see it so bad?” he said. “It doesn’t have a personality or a mind of its own, so what’s meetin’ it gonna do for you? You gonna pray to it because it’s a god? It’s a god of destruction, y’know. Nothing more than a mass of energy. It’s no different from a typhoon or an earthquake. Ya might as well pray to a power plant.”

“Having a personality, a will, or being capable of thought is of little importance,” Randou replied solemnly. “It is a massive force of destruction. Capable of scorching the earth, staining the skies, and rumbling the air. It is not of this world—something that the human mind cannot comprehend. That power is enough for me. Tell me, Chuuya. Where is this being that defies human comprehension? Where is this god that set me aflame?”

Chuuya didn’t immediately respond. He gazed at the palm of his hand, then flipped his hand over and stared some more. He was buying time to think. Eventually, however, he sighed in resignation.

“All right. If you really wanna know, I’ll tell ya.” Chuuya’s eyes were crystal clear as if they could soak up everything in their sight. “Arahabaki...”



He took a deep breath in and out.

“...is me.”



Dazai stepped back.

“What...?”

Chuuya’s expression was still in every respect. It wasn’t insinuating anything, nor did it have any real motive. He was simply offering the truth.

“It appears I was right, after all.” Randou nodded slowly. “I had a hunch that you were.”

“I only remember part of my life,” Chuuya quietly confessed. “Unlike you, I didn’t lose my memories from a blow to the head. My life started that day eight years ago. Everything before that was darkness. I was floating in that bluish-black darkness, sealed away in some sort of facility. Arahabaki isn’t a god. It can’t resurrect the dead, either. I don’t even know why I as a person exist. All I know is that someone destroyed the seal and pulled me out of there,” Chuuya explained. “It was you, wasn’t it, Randou?”

A bluish-black darkness. A heavy, quiet darkness surrounded by transparent walls. And the strong hand of someone who broke the seal.

“I need answers,” Chuuya demanded. “Where did you find me? Why did you break me out of there? How were you able to materialize Arahabaki’s complete form? I’ve been following the rumors to get those answers. Looks like we finally meet again. Now, come on. Spit it out.”

But Randou didn’t respond. He lowered his gaze, hiding his expression while trembling. However, he wasn’t shivering because he was cold. He was *laughing*.

“Of course. Of course I’ll tell you... You have every right to know.” He spoke in a low, sonorous voice. “But it would probably be quicker to demonstrate rather than explain... Chuuya, this is what I did to you eight years ago.”

Their surroundings instantly transformed. Space inverted and separated from the outside world. They were no longer in an abandoned shipyard but somewhere completely different.

“Is this your subspace skill, Randou...?” Dazai looked around. “But I never heard anything about you being able to create a portal of this scale...”

The subspace shimmered crimson, expanding until it swallowed the entire shipyard and even the building’s rooftop.

“As you already know...my subspace is a separate world completely severed from ordinary space,” said Randou. “Nobody can come inside unless I invite them.”

“Unbelievable.” Dazai continued to gape. “Power of this magnitude goes beyond the standard for sub-execs. This skill is executive level. No, it’s even greater than that... How have you been able to keep this a secret from the organization this whole time?”

“I haven’t. I simply remembered how to do it recently...along with my real name.”

Randou took a step forward. Even within the crimson subspace, there was something clearly off about him.

“Your real name?” said Dazai. “Randou, who are you?”

“My name isn’t Randou.”

The space around Randou wavered as black flames surrounded him like flower petals, burning soundlessly.

“A friend started calling me that after misreading the name on one of my belongings. When I remembered my real name, I came up with a new scheme. I made a decision to impersonate a god and exploit a demon... And I did it all to find and *kill you*, Chuuya.”

The center of the subspace suddenly burst. The rush of high-density air formed a shock wave—although strictly speaking, this was no wave of air but a massive vibration created when *space itself* burst. Chuuya was engulfed by the powerful surge.

“Guh?!”

The subspace wave effortlessly knocked Chuuya backward until he slammed through a rusty shipyard pillar and crashed into the concrete wall.

“Gwah...!”

Unable to get back on his feet, Chuuya coughed up copious amounts of blood onto the ground.

“Hmm... So that didn’t kill you. It appears Arahabaki has a strong vessel, albeit one not remotely complete.”

“What...?” All Dazai could do was stare at Chuuya in mute amazement. “Why didn’t you use gravity to block?”

“He couldn’t. I used space itself to create that shock wave. The laws of physics do not apply,” said Randou. “Everything within this subspace is mine to control. Therefore, my skill can only exist inside it. Like this...”

Swish. Swish. The wind howled.

“Damn it... This ain’t good,” Chuuya mumbled as he wiped the blood from his lips. “He’s here.”

A figure emerged from the other side of the subspace’s crimson haze.

“What a familiar face... It feels like ages since I last saw you. My boy...how have you been? Has the good doctor been treating you well?”

An old man dressed in a black overcoat was hovering in midair.

“Oh my. Look who it is.” Even Dazai’s smile was tense. “Long time no see. How’s your lower back doing? Your complexion looks a lot better. Maybe dying was actually good for your health, boss—or should I say...former boss?”

The old man’s limbs were frail, and his eye sockets were sunken from age. Protruding veins covered his cheeks, and his eyes burned with the tyranny of yesteryear.

This was the merciless tyrant of the night—the villain of Yokohama. His inhuman desire for destruction had manifested as a curse. He was the embodiment of the Port Mafia’s evil.

“The old boss is dead. What did you do, Randou?”

“He...*is my skill*,” Randou told Dazai while hunching over. “My skill integrates corpses into its subspace and turns them into skills. I dug up the old boss’s

grave. However, I can only control one corpse at a time. That is to say...the old boss now serves me as my own skill-derived life-form.”

Both Dazai and Chuuya were speechless. They had come to know countless skill users over the years, but never before had either of them seen such a mysterious, otherworldly skill: *the ability to turn people into skills*.

“This is madness,” Dazai uttered, straining his voice. “Just who are you?”

“I was once a European spy sent to enemy nations to steal information,” Randou revealed, his eyes still cast downward. “And eight years ago, I snuck into this country on a mission. I was to investigate and seize an unknown high-energy being that the Japanese government was researching.”

“And that being...was Arahabaki?” Dazai interrupted, grimacing. “Didn’t you say you were a spy for Europe? There are only a few dozen in the world with similarly unparalleled skills: the Transcendents. Randou, are you—?”

“Allow me to reintroduce myself.”

Randou pantomimed removing a hat and placing it against his chest, then bowed.

“Rimbaud. *Arthur Rimbaud*. My skill is called *Illuminations*. Chuuya, my goal is to kill you and absorb you into my skill.”

Numerous explosions suddenly went off. Chuuya leaped into the air, dodging the wall of concentrated red waves before landing against a building and running to dodge each follow-up wave.

“Tsk!”

Every surface Chuuya ran across was immediately shattered into dust one after another. The iron pillars were smashed by the powerful blows as well. Chuuya wouldn’t survive a single hit.

“Not even you can continue to run away from space itself forever,” the previous boss said.

Chuuya kicked off the wall and jumped, only to be met with another shock wave. Even though he could control the gravitational force affecting his body, his mobility was greatly hindered in the air compared to when he was on the

ground. He couldn't run away from all the attacks.

"Ha-ha!" Chuuya laughed. "You really think this is enough to defeat me?"

He spun, then kicked off empty space and dodged the shock wave.

"What...?!"

Chuuya had leaped off a tiny piece of the building that was floating in the air, using a fingertip-sized fragment of the wall to dodge while simultaneously maximizing the wall's gravitational force and minimizing his own. By switching the mass ratios, he appeared to be leaping through empty space as if he were a flying squirrel hopping between boulders. Space waves relentlessly pursued Chuuya through the air, one after another, but each time, he kicked off another piece of airborne debris to avoid each strike.

"You have a wonderful gift, boy," the previous boss intoned, "but keep running and you will eventually find yourself cornered."

Another shock wave shot right toward Chuuya. There was no way for him to escape the incoming strikes as long as he was in this subspace. And since space itself lacked mass, he was unable to manipulate the gravity of the attacks. Chuuya had finally found a skill that rivaled his—one that had the advantage.

However...

"Seems like you're gettin' forgetful in your old age."

The next shock wave rushed toward him...and then vanished into thin air. Chuuya had used a shield to block the attack.

"Hey, do you think you could not pull on my collar like that? You're hurting my neck!" the shield protested.

"Dazai? ...Hmph," Randou scoffed.

"I'll just have him nullify your skill," Chuuya explained, still holding onto Dazai. "Even if you're careful that the subspace doesn't touch him, your attacks still won't be able to hit me. So much for being a high-level European spy. You can't do anything about his nullification powers."

"Yes...I must agree with you there. Dazai's existence is bizarre even to me. He possesses the ultimate anti-skill—no one like him exists in all of Europe.

However..." Randou raised a hand into the air.

"Chuuya! Pull me back as hard as you can!" Dazai shouted as a silver ray of light shot their way at almost that exact moment.

The space had been severed. A silver flash sliced where Dazai's head had been only moments prior. The tip of a scythe sliced through his clothes, skin, and muscle. Blood instantly squirted out of the wound.

"Gwah...!" Dazai moaned. Chuuya, who had pulled him out of the way, went wide-eyed in astonishment.

"That's impossible!" he shouted. "How did that...?!"

The silver flash of light that cut Dazai...was a scythe around the size of a person. The old man holding it gave a muffled laugh.

"Karma... This is indeed karma. I never imagined a day would come where I could behead this boy with my own two hands," the previous Mafia boss crowed hoarsely. "If only we could chat about old times first, but...this body isn't even capable of that."

"Boss, you are no longer human...," Randou solemnly stated. "I preserved your personality and memories...but you are still nothing more than my skill. And your mission...is to slow Dazai down with that scythe until Chuuya is dead."

"Very well. Yes, I see... This soul is but a piece of scrap paper stuck to a skill, and this body is merely an empty automaton with no will of its own. And yet...I find it strangely satisfying."

The previous boss raised his scythe. Floating in the air, cloaked in black fabric, he looked exactly like the grim reaper.

"Well, this is less than ideal." Dazai painfully groaned as he clutched at the laceration to his chest. "That scythe's an actual weapon, not a skill. Randou must have gotten it somewhere and given it to the old boss. In other words—"

"It could even kill you, huh?" Chuuya glanced at Dazai.

The cut was deep. His chest had been sliced all the way to his arm, and his clothes were already soaked dark red in blood. He needed treatment soon, or he wasn't going to make it.

“Tsk. Damn it.” Chuuya grimaced. “This is not lookin’ good for us.”

A shock wave attack with no mass, which prevented Chuuya from blocking it.

A scythe that Dazai couldn’t nullify since it wasn’t a skill.

All it took was a single skill to completely subdue them.

“Dazai, I never wanted to kill you. The mere thought of killing a child breaks my heart,” Randou said drearily. “But you know the truth now, and if Mori learned of that same truth, he would have me assassinated... I would end up killing countless comrades I once worked with...and that I want to avoid. Taking your life alone isn’t a bad deal in comparison. My apologies—I need you to die along with Chuuya,” he added with a hint of genuine guilt. His eyes were tainted with darkness, just like everyone in the Mafia. It was a murky darkness—one that viewed human lives as mere numbers.

The skill user who once called himself Randou took a step forward, his body engulfed in black flames. The late Mafia boss floated high in the air wielding his shining silver scythe of death.

“Yeah... We’re not beating them,” Dazai calmly stated. “Time to just give up and accept death.”

“The hell?”

Dazai suddenly took a seat on the ground. Chuuya stared in evident astonishment; Dazai’s expression was entirely unremarkable. It was the face of someone who wasn’t hiding anything, who simply said what they were really feeling.

“What’s wrong with you?” Chuuya demanded.

“What do you want me to do? It’s hopeless. He’s a highly trained intelligence operative from Europe. There’s no way we can beat him.”

“Stop tal—”

A shock wave suddenly hit Chuuya before he could finish his sentence.

He tried to jump out of the way, but he didn’t make it in time; the left half of his body absorbed the blow, instantly knocking him backward as if he’d been hit by a giant cannonball. His body tore up the soil before he slammed into the

rubble of the collapsed wall.

“Dazai is right,” Randou replied, his hand still raised from firing a shock wave. “Chuuya, you should give up as well. I am far too familiar with both of your powers. Fighting back is simply going to make you suffer more.”

“Damn...it...”

Chuuya grimaced, buried in the debris, as blood trickled out of the corners of his mouth.

“My objective cannot be achieved as long as you are still alive,” Randou apologetically admitted. “Eight years ago, I tried to steal you and run away, but...I made a mistake. The enemy had me surrounded, and I was unable to force my way through using the skill-derived life-form under my control at the time. That was when it hit me: Perhaps I could make my skill even stronger if I absorbed you, the destructive god Arahabaki. And that’s what I did. I delivered the fatal blow and made you mine, but...that was when the unexpected happened. What I took in was a *safeguard*. In other words: you, Chuuya. You, the human identity engraved into Arahabaki, were like a talisman preventing the god from going out of control. Attempting to make Arahabaki my skill removed the safeguard, and its true form manifested in the outside world... The rest is exactly as I explained it back at the mansion. The god of destruction appeared in its complete form and destroyed everything.”

Randou took a step forward. His environs flickered crimson like a flame.

“I won’t make the same mistake twice, though. I will cut off your head and make sure to kill Arahabaki, your true form, before absorbing you. I have killed countless seasoned skill users far stronger than either you or Dazai. Resisting will only delay the inevitable,” Randou quietly insisted.

But that was neither a threat nor bluff. It was clear from the look on his face that he was merely stating the truth.

Space itself began to shake as it gathered around Randou. An unbelievable power capable of cratering and decimating the ground underfoot was waiting to be released.

“Hmm... Randou, I have a proposal,” Dazai said, still covering his wound. “Give

me a few minutes, and I'll convince Chuuya to give up."

Randou briefly glanced at Dazai in silent thought. "How many minutes?"

"Five would be nice."

Randou closed his eyes. "You have two."

"Thanks."

Dazai unsteadily dragged his feet over to Chuuya, who was still under the rubble. He then crouched down and leaned toward him.

"Get away from me," Chuuya spat. "You're not gonna convince me to do anything."

"I know." Dazai glanced at Randou. Then he whispered quietly so that Randou couldn't hear: "Let's beat him. Together."

Chuuya stared at Dazai in bewilderment, seemingly uncomprehending. "...Are you being serious?"

"I have a plan, but I can't do it alone. It needs both of us to work. Do you trust me?"

Chuuya held Dazai's gaze for a brief moment and demanded, "Tell me what made you change your mind. I thought you wanted to die."

"I just felt like it. Is that not a good enough reason?" Dazai smiled, perplexed.

"It's not."

He nodded cheerfully. "Then I'll tell you why."

Dazai looked at Randou, then the subspace, and finally stared at the city in the distance.

"Working for the Mafia has piqued my interest, albeit slightly," Dazai began. "In the outside world—the world of light—death is kept separate from everyday life. It's swept under the rug. People find it unpleasant. But the Mafia's world isn't like that. Death is an extension of everyday life. It's a part of life. And I tend to think that's more accurate. Death isn't the opposite of life but merely a function of it. We breathe, eat, fall in love, and die. And you can't get the full picture of living without observing death up close."

Chuuya quietly stared at Dazai's expression as if he were searching for something human deep inside of him. "So you're saying...you want to live now?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Dazai replied with a resigned smile. "Maybe I won't find anything, but I figure I'll give it a try. Once I successfully complete this mission, I'm going to join the Mafia. Gotta defeat him first, though. Besides..."

"'Besides'...?"

"I got a new dog—you. And I still haven't given you any commands," Dazai said with a smirk. Chuuya snorted.

"Yep, you're still a piece of shit. Your plan better not fail and get us both killed, or I'm gonna kill you, *Dazai*."

Dazai smiled back at him. "I'm fine with that. Now, let's do this, *Chuuya*."

They stood side by side and began walking toward Randou.

"Did you convince him?" Randou asked.

"Yep," Dazai replied. "Everything went smoothly. Chuuya convinced me not to die yet."

Bewilderment flashed across Randou's face. A few seconds went by until he forced his lips into a smile.

"I see." He sighed. "Mori would jump for joy if he heard that. After all, this would normally be something worth celebrating. I will do my best to make sure your death is painless."

"Heh. What a gentleman." A smirk made its way to Chuuya's face. "Do you have any idea how I feel right now?"

"I cannot even imagine."

"I'm ecstatic. It's been ages since I could fight with both hands!"

Chuuya dashed forward. A crimson shock wave burst right before his eyes, but he appeared to have expected it. He launched himself off the ground with both hands, then used the momentum to throw himself into the air.

"These fists aren't gonna stop till they meet your face!"

He scattered the gravel he'd picked up in each hand and used the fine particles as footholds to sprint up and down, left and right like lightning. The crimson shock wave followed his small figure, but all it could destroy were the blurs of movement left in Chuuya's wake as he rocketed through space.

"Ha-ha-ha-haaa!" he cackled as he hurtled toward Randou and aimed a comet-like kick at the man's heart.

Just then, a crimson shock wave pierced the air.

"Hff...!"

Air expelled from Randou's lungs as he raised both hands, creating a condensed subspace shield that blocked the kick. The blow was so powerful that the soles of Randou's shoes cracked radial fissures into the ground beneath him.

"Dazai! Now!" Chuuya shouted.

"What—?!"

Dazai was already standing right in front of Randou. He had approached him like a shadow hiding behind Chuuya's flashy attack.

"Hmph!" Randou snorted. "Sneaking up on me so you could touch me and prevent my skill from manifesting?"

No skill could touch Dazai. Any skill user's powers would be nullified if they touched a part of his body, leaving that person virtually naked.

"However..."

Something dark appeared between Dazai and Randou. It was death itself, clothed in ominous robes.

"It's time to die, boy," the old boss declared hoarsely.

"...He saw right through my plan, huh?" said Dazai.

The silver scythe glimmered with death as it fell. And yet, Dazai didn't look away. He watched the blade swinging down at him with utmost calm. It was as if he knew the scythe wouldn't touch him.

And the blade did stop...right at the tip of his nose.

“You have no idea how irritatin’ this is, you crafty son of a bitch,” Chuuya grumbled while still midair. “I can’t believe your prediction was right again!”

“Hrm...?”



Something dark was restraining the old boss's scythe.

It was Chuuya's biker jacket wrapped around the base of the scythe. He had thrown it into the air while manipulating its gravity, and the weight of it caused the massive scythe to drop. After it hit the ground with a resounding thud, the jacket returned to its normal weight and softly fell.

"Haaaaaah!"

Chuuya swung his fist down at the old boss. Each punch was no different than a burning comet, slowly breaking down the predecessor's body.

"Gwah..."

The previous boss's inhuman form gradually cracked open, expelling flames from each lacerated wound and pushing him back.

"Eat dirt, you old fart!"

Chuuya grabbed the previous boss's face, and black waves of gravitational force shot out from his hand. The predecessor's body slammed into the ground, sending radial cracks through the spot where he landed. Nevertheless, Chuuya still didn't ease up the gravity. Instead, he pressed the old man's body into the earth by applying as much gravitational force as he could muster.

"Even this artificial body...is not powerful enough," the old boss said as he gradually sank into the ground. "How unfortunate. But impressive work, boy."

"You can't use your hands anymore," said Chuuya. Then he shouted, "Dazai! Now!"

"I'm already on it!"

Dazai sprinted right for Randou, one fist raised.

The boy's eyes were as clear as the sky on a sunny day; they lacked any shred of trepidation. This was not something earned, for only those determined to live could possess their heavenly blue sparkle.

"Haaaaaah!"

Dazai's fist closed in on Randou's face.

Until all of a sudden...

...*the world collapsed.*

“What—?!”

A crimson glow had engulfed everything in sight. The buildings vanished along with the ground beneath. Even gravity itself had disappeared. Their entire environs had been shaken up, broken down, and were now floating in midair.

“You should already know my powers allow me to manipulate subspace.”

They heard a voice—something not human was speaking in this crimson world.

“In other words, I can control everything inside it,” the voice continued. “Dazai, you may be my greatest threat; your fists will never reach me as long as I can manipulate where you stand or the distance you move.”

Randou was floating. His overcoat fluttered in the wind, countless pieces of rubble hovering around him.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Chuuya spat. “The hell can’t his skill do...?”

Dazai looked around in mute amazement. “Sneaking into the Mafia’s vault must have been a piece of cake with a skill like this.”

The world inside the subspace no longer resembled any place on earth. The ground was hollowed, and the buildings were destroyed. Everything was floating in the crimson atmosphere. Dazai and Chuuya stood atop giant pieces of rubble like tiny ants clinging on for dear life.

“Does this place look familiar, Chuuya? You’ve been here once before, after all,” said Randou. “On that day eight years ago, my partner and I infiltrated this country to steal a high-energy being. We learned that it was sealed away in a secret military facility...but when we captured you, Chuuya, and tried to flee...*something happened*—something not good. But I still cannot remember what that something was. All I do remember is that it led the enemy to find me and back me into a corner until I had no choice but to absorb Arahaki as my skill.”

Debris swirled around Randou. The indescribable noise filled the air as something invisible to the eye roared into space.

“Randou,” said Dazai, “just what is Arahabaki? Who is Chuuya?”

“Not even I know. Bringing Chuuya back with me and finding the answer to that question was one of my duties...but every record stored in the secret facility where Chuuya was being kept was wiped out in the explosion. There is perhaps no one left who knows the truth... Nevertheless, when I turn Chuuya into my skill, his memories will be reconstructed. Then all questions will be answered. Perhaps something happened to my friend that day as well.”

“Your friend...?” Chuuya muttered as he gazed up at the crimson world.

“Yes. My spy partner who snuck into the facility with me was also my dearest friend. His name was Paul Verlaine, another skill user who overcame many dangers,” Randou explained. “What happened to him? Did he die in the explosion? Or is he alive somewhere? That is the sole thing I cannot remember. Therefore, I need your memories, Chuuya. But if I try to integrate you while you’re still alive, the same thing that occurred eight years ago will happen again. You must die so that I can absorb your dead body and learn what became of my friend—so that I can fill in those missing eight years—so that I can save him.”

“I see... So it’s all for your partner,” Dazai said listlessly. “Betraying the Mafia, spreading rumors about the old boss’s resurrection, this fight we’re in now... It’s kind of hard to believe, to be honest.”

“Maybe for a slimeball like you it is,” Chuuya scoffed. He looked up at Randou. “Throwing everything away for your friends is a perfectly respectable reason to risk your life if you ask me... What more could you ask for in an opponent?”

Chuuya focused his skill in both hands. The mass of his fists increased as the air shook around them.

“Hey. You wanna know why I always fight without using my hands?” Chuuya asked as he approached Randou. Numerous pebbles vibrated by his feet and floated with each step. “I’ve never lost a fight in my life. I’ve never even been in real danger... But that’s no surprise. After all, I’m not even human. My identity is a *safeguard*, like you said. Nothing more than a little pattern etched on a colossal furnace of power. Hey... Do you know how that feels?”

Chuuya stepped onto empty space, using the floating debris to walk in midair. He took another step forward with his other leg. And just like that, Chuuya slowly approached Randou as if he were ascending a staircase.

“That’s why I kept my hands in my pockets. I figured I’d one day feel like I was about to lose, no longer enjoying the fight but just doing everything I could to protect myself... I thought maybe that way I’d start to like myself as a person—me, a little pattern without a body of my own.”

He launched himself into the air like a falcon tearing through the crimson night.

All of a sudden, a shock wave appeared right before him, powerful enough to pulverize an entire building...and yet, Chuuya went right through it without even attempting to dodge.

“What?!”

“Haaaaaah!”

His clothes and flesh split open as he shot through the shock wave. Copious amounts of blood followed the many cuts that appeared on Chuuya’s body, but he did not slow down.

“He absorbed the impact by increasing the gravity and density of his clothes and skin...?!”

Chuuya left a trail of blood in his wake as his every bone cried in agony, but even then, he managed a ferocious smirk.

He used lateral gravity to increase his speed even further, launching himself at Randou like a living cannonball. There was no wall to stop the soaring menace, no time to create a barrier of subspace waves. The old boss wouldn’t make it to Randou in time to absorb the blow, either.

Chuuya buried his fist deep into Randou’s stomach, folding the man’s body in half. He accelerated even more, turning himself into a living storm as he threw a right hook that tore through the air. Then came a roundhouse kick, followed immediately by a lightning-fast ax kick. Chuuya pivoted on his right heel, using gravity to anchor his left heel as he slammed his knee into Randou’s chin.

Punch, kick, punch, punch, punch, kick, punch—the ceaseless attacks came from each and every direction with the weight of heavy machinery behind them. Moreover, each blow accurately hit Randou’s vital spots. It was a relentless storm of punches and kicks where one flowed into the next, speeding up with every strike. The onslaught was unstoppable.

Chuuya slammed a foot into Randou’s chest, then spun like a wheel so quickly that his next kick looked like a mere blur. The resulting impact was powerful enough to make the air vibrate. Randou was immediately sent crashing into the earth as a cloud of dust rose into the air.

“Incredible...,” Dazai muttered absentmindedly as he watched from the ground.

Chuuya landed in the cloud of dust and immediately dropped to his knees, out of breath. The lightning-quick succession of blows had clearly worn him out. He placed both hands on the ground to keep himself from collapsing.

When the dust eventually settled, he looked up...and his expression froze.

“Magnificent.” Randou was standing on the other side of the dust cloud with not even a scratch on him, despite having taken so many hits. He didn’t appear to be in any pain whatsoever. “Chuuya, you already possess strength and talents all your own, separate from Arahabaki. You are strong not as a god but as a human being.”

“Gee... Thanks,” Chuuya mumbled, his breath ragged. “But I’m kinda bummed out... There’s not even a scratch on you after all that.”

“So be it—this is my world.” Randou lifted his hands and showed Chuuya his skin. “I use subspace to keep a thin film over my skin. No physical attack can break through it.”

“Hmph... Anything goes when you’re a skill user from Europe, huh?”

A shadow rose above Chuuya—one in a black robe. He saw the previous boss’s deathly visage followed by a silver flash aimed for his neck.

“Tsk.”

Chuuya couldn’t stand right away; he had overexerted himself. He began

lifting his arms to touch the blade at the last second and manipulate its gravity... but the subspace sliced the gravitational field open, allowing for the tip of the scythe to pass clean through.

“Mn...!”

The scythe pierced Chuuya’s left arm right below the wrist until the blade came out the other side and dug into the floor. Chuuya was pinned down like a laboratory animal about to be dissected.

“You won’t be able to move around so quickly with a wound like that,” said Randou. “Which is why you won’t be able to dodge the next shock wave, either.”

A shock wave crushed Chuuya with enough force to shatter a boulder.

“Chuuya!”

Dazai tried running over to help, but he was too far away. It would take ten seconds to reach Chuuya, even if he sprinted across the hovering debris.

“Another.”

Another shock wave came crashing down, fracturing the ground and sending clods of earth flying.

“And another.”

The next shock wave came from below, rending the earth and scattering the fragments everywhere.

“The next attacks will be consecutive.”

He knocked Chuuya into the ground, tossed him into the air—and almost simultaneously, countless shock waves hit Chuuya from all sides. He couldn’t dodge, much less get into position to block them. It was like being hit by a car in every direction. The seamless attacks appeared to have no end in sight.

The crimson shock waves eventually ceased. Chuuya’s body had been crushed, twisted, and ripped apart. He lay facedown, not even twitching. A rusty metal drum by his side had been smashed into a thin board after the attack.

“Even a tank would be completely flattened after that much force,” Randou said quietly. “I will reconstruct your broken bones and organs after I absorb you into my skill.”

Randou solemnly extended his arm toward Chuuya, and a light appeared at the tip of his finger. He was trying to absorb Chuuya as a skill.

“No need to worry. Your soul and identity will soon become nothing more than superficial information...although I suppose that’s no different from now.”

Chuuya’s body was wrapped in light.

However...

“I appreciate it.”

He swiftly jumped to his feet, then thrust the scythe piercing his arm deep into Randou’s chest.

“What...?”

Chuuya was alive. He was covered in a myriad of lacerations and bruises, along with a number of broken bones, but nonetheless alive.

He pushed the scythe even deeper into Randou’s chest, piercing the man’s sternum until blood suddenly sprayed out.

“Im...possi...ble...”

“I’m pissed, too.” Chuuya’s scowling face was bruised and cut up. “Every last detail went just as that sly bastard said it would, even the ending.”

Dazai was standing at a distance. “Sorry, Randou.”

In his left hand was a piece of fabric: a garland he’d used as decoration for Chuuya’s fake party.

The long garland dragged across the ground, cleverly hidden in the shadows of floating debris. One end of the cloth was stuffed inside Chuuya’s clothes.

“I told Chuuya to pick up this garland when you destroyed the nearby building,” Dazai said with a childlike grin.

“Then I tied it to myself using my skill,” Chuuya added with the scythe still piercing his arm. “I wrapped it around my entire body and made sure it was

hidden underneath my clothes.”

“After that, I simply touched the other end.” Dazai held up the cloth. “Want to guess what happened then?”

“The skill affecting the cloth you touched...was nullified,” Randou replied painfully. “In other words...it functioned as armor to keep the subspace shock waves from ever reaching you...”

“Exactly.”



Chuuya ripped the scythe from his arm, and copious amounts of blood immediately began spilling out. The airborne rocks and debris dropped lifelessly to the ground.

“What formidable children...you two turned out to be...”

Blood that had entered Randou’s airway now spilled from his mouth. He collapsed into a pool of his own blood with a sickening splat.

The wound was clearly fatal.



Long ago, there were two spies in a far-off country. They were colleagues, partners, friends—brotherly figures who could trust each other more than anyone.

At least, one of them felt that way.

They never cowered even when death seemed to have them in its grip. It wasn’t because of the love they had for their country, nor did honor have anything to do with it, either. They simply knew they had nothing to fear as long as they were together. They believed neither fear nor hesitation were necessary to protect each other.

At least, one of them felt that way.

One day, the two partners were given a mission to sneak into an enemy nation and steal a powerful weapon.

It was a dangerous mission. They would have no backup or support, no help from allies on the inside. Nevertheless, they accepted the mission, infiltrated the enemy facility, and found it—that unworldly *something*.

They couldn’t leave a thing like that in the enemy’s hands. They had to bring it back to their country and surrender it for research, for it would only spark further strife if they left it behind. They had to bring it back home no matter what.

...At least, one of them felt that way.



The subspace vanished, revealing the vast blue sky through the collapsed ceiling. Randou lay feebly on the ground in what was left of the shipyard.

“I see... Paul... You were...”

“Any last words, Randou?” Dazai asked quietly. “If you have any final wishes, we’ll see what we can do to—”

“No... There is nothing left for me...,” Randou said lifelessly. “When I took in... Chuuya’s skill a few moments ago...I remembered...what happened to my best friend, Paul.”

He placed both hands on the ground. No longer able to support his own weight, he slowly sank back into the pool of his own blood.

“He...betrayed me...at the very last moment...” The last remnants of life in his eyes flickered as he grew weaker. “When we were escaping...he betrayed me... and our country. He tried to stab me...from behind...but I just barely managed to dodge. We fought to the death, and in the end...I killed my best friend...with my own two hands...”

“I see,” Dazai said softly, the words falling to the ground. “A fight between two skilled spies would obviously cause a stir given the inevitable destruction that followed. So the military must have noticed that and surrounded you, right? You had no choice but to try absorbing Arahabaki...”

Randou rolled onto his back and looked up at Chuuya with crystal-clear eyes. “Chuuya... Can I...ask you...a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Live,” Randou said in almost a whisper. “There is no longer...any way of knowing...who you are or where you came from,” he rasped. “But even if...you are but a pattern...etched on the surface of raw power...you are you. Nothing changes that...because all people, all humanity...their brains and flesh...are nothing more than patterns—beautiful patterns...upon the material world...”

Both Chuuya and Dazai quietly listened as if there was something in what Randou was saying that they couldn’t allow themselves to miss.

“It’s strange... I don’t feel even the least bit cold...” Randou smiled faintly.

“The world I thought was so cold... Paul... Did you feel...this warmth in the end... as well... ..?”

His hand dropped into the puddle of blood with a splash. And then there was silence. The crimson subspace quietly vanished, and the sky returned to its usual blue hue. Some things, however, would not return to normal: the body of a man who no longer felt the cold, and the hearts of two boys who stood rooted to the spot, staring at him.

A gust of wind peered through their souls as it passed them by.

Phase.05

A month had passed.

Day turned into night and night into day. Tragedy turned into fortune and fortune into tragedy. The Arahabaki Incident was treated as a solo crime committed by Randou alone. After he betrayed the Mafia, his house was burned down, and his possessions were thrown into the ocean. It was common procedure for the Mafia to punish the traitor's family as well, but Randou had none.

His body was left outside to the elements for a week before being buried in a rural public cemetery.

A thick sea breeze blew through that cemetery, a deserted graveyard far from town, nothing more than a cluster of blank, nondescript tombstones protruding from the cliffside. Just below the cliff was the ocean, and each tombstone leaned dismally to one side from being exposed to the strong sea breeze day after day.

Seated atop one tombstone was a single boy.

"*Tsk*. Still a pain in the ass even after death," Chuuya muttered to himself with an annoyed look on his face. "The Mafia threw away all the records you collected when you were alive, so I'm having a hard time investigating. Now I don't have any leads on what that military facility was that you snuck into eight years ago and why Arahabaki was there."

He was staring straight at a new white headstone. It was chipped in several places, procured from some old stone from who knows where. A tiny lone dandelion mournfully grew at its base, swaying gently in the wind.

"Eh, not that you would've told anyone about that stuff even if you were

alive...”

Chuuya kicked his legs forward and hopped onto the ground. He then shoved his hands in his pockets, turned his back to Randou’s grave, and walked away.

“See you again soon.”

As he headed down the pathway facing the cliff, a boy suddenly appeared before him.

“So this is where you were,” the boy said. “I was looking all over for you, Chuuya.”

“Shirase...”

It was the silver-haired Sheep who’d been searching for Chuuya at the arcade the other day with two friends.

“Did you need me for something?” Chuuya asked.

“I just wanted to apologize. That’s all,” Shirase answered with a shrug. “We got into a little fight the other day, right? Y’know, at the arcade. I felt really bad after that. I realized that we shouldn’t get in the way of your freedom all because it’s inconvenient for us. You really wanted to catch that criminal, yeah? But here I was tellin’ you to put us Sheep and our rules first... Anyway, I was wrong. It was our fault for not coming up with another way to protect ourselves. We relied on you way too much.”

Chuuya appeared surprised as he listened to his friend.

“I’ve got a good grasp of where the Sheep’s problems lie,” Shirase mentioned with a faint smile. “So we all got together and came up with a solution. Want to hear it?”

“You did, huh?” Chuuya said, a note of bewilderment in his voice. He then started walking off. “Sure, tell me about it.” He passed his friend, sighed slightly, and continued, “I’m still kinda exhausted from everything that happened, so I’m all for havin’ a few extra days off to rest... Let’s chat while we walk. What kind of solution is it?”

Chuuya started sauntering down the cliffside path. The sea breeze blew a touch stronger, rustling the weeds in the graveyard.

All of a sudden, something slammed into Chuuya's back with a thud. He stumbled forward.

"This kind of solution."

Chuuya slowly turned to face the silver-haired teenager pressed against his back.

"...Shirase, you..."

The teen retreated; Chuuya lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Sticking out of his back was a brand-new dagger. Fresh blood slowly trickled out of the wound around the handle.

"The solution is to attack from outside your periphery the moment you let your guard down. That way you won't have time to manipulate gravity," Shirase said with a smile plastered on his face. "Right, Chuuya? I would know. We've been comrades for a long time, after all."

"The hell...was that for...?" Chuuya groaned painfully. He tried to get up, but his arms and legs were trembling and weak.

"I wouldn't squirm so much if I were you. The blade was tipped with rat poison." Shirase's lips curled into an even wider smirk. "Your arms and legs are gonna be numb for a while, so you won't be able to move like normal. I feel bad for you. It wouldn't have had to be like this if you weren't so strong."

"What are you...talking about...?"

Chuuya covered the wound on his back while managing to look back and glare at the silver-haired Sheep.

"This."

With a wag of the Sheep's finger, a group of soldiers instantly appeared on the other side of the graveyard with their rifles aimed at Chuuya.

"Those are...GSS soldiers..."

The highly armed soldiers formed a semicircle around Chuuya where he lay on the cliffside.

"This is what we decided on. The Sheep and GSS have joined forces," Shirase

revealed. Several boys and girls with guns weaved between the soldiers before aiming their weapons at Chuuya. Their expressions were grim.

“This is your fault, Chuuya.” He glared at Chuuya with a smile still on his face. “Everyone came to the same conclusion: What if you really did join the Mafia? What would the Sheep do? It was easy for all of us to imagine. We’d be helpless. Everyone would get killed. And that’s because we were weak. We’d always relied on those incredible powers of yours. We couldn’t just let dozens of lives depend on the whims of one person. They call that a ‘vulnerability.’ An organizational vulnerability—like how a flood can sneak through a small crack in the foundation of a fortress and destroy it. You get what I’m trying to say?”

“You dumbass... Do you really think...I’d betray my friends...?” Chuuya growled. Cold sweat dripped down his pale face. The poison seemed to be working.

“See, GSS doesn’t switch loyalties on a whim. We can trust ’em so long as there’s something in it for them. This is the smarter way to take on a powerful organization like the Port Mafia.”

Chuuya, his breath ragged, looked around—first at the teens pointing their guns at him and then at the GSS soldiers. The people he’d thought were his friends up until a few moments ago were now staring him down like terrifying beasts.

“So that’s it...,” Chuuya managed between gasps. “Everything I did...was just an annoyance...to you all...”

“We’re really grateful to you, Chuuya.” Shirase took the gun out of the holster at his waist and aimed it at his former leader. “We Sheep took you in when you had no family and nowhere to go, but you already gave us more than enough in return. That’s why...it’s time to rest...after dying and contributing to the Sheep one last time.”

He signaled to the soldiers with his chin. “Kill him.”

A barrage of gunfire followed. Chuuya blocked each bullet with his skill at first, but there were too many. The Sheep knew what kind of ammo it would take to kill him. A heavy downpour of bullets rained on Chuuya.

He used his nearly lifeless limbs to roll away as the ceaseless gunfire pelted the weed-covered dirt where he'd just been.

The next moment, he increased the gravity on the soles of his feet, sinking his body into the ground. A fissure opened up in the earth and immediately spread until the bullet-ridden soil could no longer hold.

The ground crumbled beneath him as if it had been shaved off the cliffside. Chuuya fell along with the crumbling earth, sending clouds of dust into the air. The ocean's raging waves waited for him below.

"He threw himself off the cliff!" Shirase shouted. "The poison might've weakened his powers, but he ain't gonna die from a fall like that! Hurry—after him! Don't let him live!"

A white wave broke over the boulder at the bottom of the cliff. Chuuya tottered up an unmarked path.

"Damn...it...," he grumbled, clinging onto the wet rock with both hands. "This wound's...deep..."

Chuuya focused on the wound on his back. He applied a weak gravitational force on the dagger and slowly pulled it out, then dropped it into the ocean. The poison had dramatically hindered both his skill and his physical strength. The Sheep knew all too well how to kill the invincible Chuuya. That was hardly surprising. Unlike with Randou, Chuuya never tried hiding his true powers around them. They were friends; he had no reason to hide.

He heard the soldiers shouting something at the top of the cliff, while at the bottom, the sound of sporadic gunfire grew closer. It wouldn't be long before they surrounded Chuuya again. The Sheep couldn't let him live, for he knew where their hideout was, where they hid their weapons, along with their criminal records—every weakness they possessed. Chuuya couldn't help himself from smirking.

"Leader, my ass...," he muttered under his breath as the waves splashed against him. "I was the one...who ruined...the Sheep..."

He grabbed on to a boulder and lifted himself up to find a nearby slope that was sparsely forested. He walked through the trees, dragging his wet body with

each step, until a figure suddenly appeared before him—a small, lanky youth. Chuuya's face grimly tensed, thinking he'd been surrounded, but he was wrong.

“Hey, Chuuya. Looks like you're having a rough day. Need a hand?”

It was Dazai.

“Dazai...? What are you...doing here...?” Chuuya asked vacantly.

“Work. When I told Mori I was gonna join the Mafia, he jumped for joy and said he was going to give me something nice. ‘Something nice’ being putting me in charge of a bunch of soldiers and a new job I was forced to do.”

That instant, a great number of shadowy figures showed up at Dazai's command. They were dressed in dark suits with black rifles in their hands. It was a group of expressionless mafiosi—unfeeling, machinelike men who knew nothing of compassion.

“The Sheep and the GSS apparently formed an alliance, so the boss wants to eliminate them before they get too strong...which is what brings me here,” Dazai explained. “Anyway, shouldn't be a difficult first job. It'll be over before lunch.”

Chuuya held his wound while panting. “What are...you after...?” He eyed Dazai sharply. “Obviously, runnin' into...ya here...isn't a coincidence... You tryin' to save me...so that I'll owe you?”

“Who said I was saving you? I think you're the worst. We just came here to slaughter our enemies, every last one of them.”

“Every last one...?” Chuuya's expression froze. “You mean...all the Sheep, too?”

Dazai observed Chuuya and smirked as if he wanted to say something. Several silent moments passed before he offered a loaded reply:

“Yep. That's our policy. They're a dangerous organization, after all. But, well... let's say a Mafia associate—someone with inside info on the enemy—was willing to tell us how to weaken the enemy without killing them, then I'd consider revising our policy.”

“Help from...an associate...?” Chuuya asked with a stern look.

“Yep. We can’t trust any tips from an enemy, but we could definitely trust one of our own. That’s how all organizations work, right?”

Chuuya remained silent...because he knew exactly what Dazai was trying to say.

“So that’s...what this is about,” Chuuya said hoarsely. “You wanna...make a deal, huh?”

“Hmm... I don’t know.” Dazai smiled, dodging the question. “But I do know that a certain someone lost during our little game at the arcade, so if they do join the Mafia, they’re gonna spend the rest of their days serving me like a dog.”

Chuuya glared at him, still breathing heavily. Despite his trembling legs and the sweat pouring down his face, he didn’t take his eyes off Dazai for a second. He quietly stared at Dazai as if all the answers were written on his face.

Soon, he could hear soldiers’ footsteps and gunshots approaching. He was running out of time.

“Don’t kill...the Sheep... They’re just kids,” he stammered, practically expelling as much air out of his lungs as he could. “They took...good care of me.”

“Very well.” Dazai smiled. “You guys heard that, right? It’s time to get to work. As we discussed earlier, you’re not allowed to harm any of the kids. Let’s go. It’s time we remind our enemies why we used to be called the terror of the night.”

Dazai strode through the woods, his Mafia soldiers following in silence as if they were servants of death before they all vanished among the trees.

Chuuya was watching them go when it suddenly hit him.

“Oh...,” he said. “Even this...was all part of his plan. Ever since he made that phone call at the arcade... He did that to sow doubt about me...among the Sheep...”

Dazai had called Mori at the arcade and asked him to release the Sheep hostages. The Sheep thought that Chuuya would come back to them after that, but he instead prioritized his mission, albeit without telling them his real motive. That was when the Sheep realized that their safety depended on

Chuuya's feelings at any given moment.

Everything went exactly how Dazai had planned it.

He even knew the Sheep would come for Chuuya. Thus, he brought Mori his strategy and mobilized his men. After that, he simply waited until Chuuya could no longer refuse his deal.

"He's a demon... That son of a bitch."

Chuuya stood clutching his wound, then glanced in the direction Dazai had disappeared. He seemed to be looking for an invisible sign of what future that spawn of darkness would create. He then growled:

"...Bring it on."

Epilogue

Dazai was walking through the Mafia building's underground passage: a long, dreary, white hall with nothing more than fluorescent lights and the occasional fire extinguisher. Its sole purpose was for evacuating in case of an enemy attack.

He was on crutches because of an injury to his left leg. Walking by his side was Mori, wearing a white laboratory coat, along with a small child holding a doll.

"...Which is why I am giving this to you as your next job," said Mori.

"Uh-huh... So this kid is a skill user?" Dazai asked. "Hey, kid. Show me your skill," he demanded.

But the child, who appeared to be around five or six years old, didn't so much as glance in Dazai's direction, instead continuing to quietly look ahead, doll in hand.

"I told you already. This child still cannot use the skill at will. That's why I don't even know exactly what that skill is," Mori said as he patted the child's head. "This little one apparently hurt another child at an associate's hospital, so I decided to take the tyke under my wing. I hear the kid didn't even lift a finger, and yet the other child was severely injured. In any case, I want you to figure out what this skill actually does. Shouldn't be much risk for you, Dazai, since you can always nullify it."

Dazai got right in the small child's face and stared.

"Kyuusaku!" the child suddenly shouted cheerfully. "Hee-hee-hee! I'm Kyuusaku! Come on, let's pway! Let's pway!"

"Yeah, yeah. When you're older," Dazai replied indifferently.

Two sets of footsteps from a pair of shadows echoed down that same

hallway.

“...Anyway, that should give you a general idea of what we’re going to discuss at the meeting,” said one of the shadowy figures—a tall woman wearing a kimono with her flaming-scarlet hair tied into a bun. “Any questions, young man?”

“Could you not call me ‘young man’?” the other figure—Chuuya—asked. “Anyway, I actually do have a question, ma’am. Why are you bringing me with you to the meeting?”

“Could you not call me ‘ma’am,’ either, then? I’m not that old yet.” The kimono-clad woman glared at him. “I am bringing you so you can learn. We are meeting with an individual from one of the Mafia’s front organizations. He’s a CEO from a trading company Mori recently acquired. Every cup of tea served, every pause in the conversation sways the outcome of a negotiation. You need to learn that you can no longer solve your problems by smashing someone’s head in.”

“Uh-huh...” Chuuya scratched his head, seemingly unconvinced. “But do you really think having me there is a good idea? What if I do something to piss the guy off?”

“We can deal with that when it happens.” The woman covered her mouth with her sleeve and laughed gracefully. “If something that trivial is enough to ruin things, then you might as well tackle the issue with full force.”

“If you say so...,” Chuuya replied with a troubled expression.

Another voice came down the hallway from the opposite direction.

“Hey, Mori. Is this kid a boy or girl?”

“Now that you mention it, I still haven’t asked... I suppose I can check their files later.”

Another voice came down the hallway from the opposite direction.

“By the way, young man, I don’t remember you having a black hat yesterday. Where did you get it?”

“Oh, this? Well...”

The two young men's voices crossed paths on that day, at that time, in that hallway. It was nothing out of the ordinary—not an event that would ever go down in history or even be worth remembering.

“...Ah!!”

“Ahhh! You've got some nerve bein' here!”

Their shouting filled the hallway as the two adults watched in utter astonishment.

“Chuuya! Why do you think I had you join the Mafia?!” Dazai yelled furiously as he rounded on Chuuya. “You're supposed to be my dog! If I say my foot is itchy, you scratch it! If I say I want to eat soba, you go threaten a soba shop owner into coming here! If I say I want to see a play, you get on that stage and you start acting! That's your job! And what do you do instead? You join Kouyou's unit and head straight to the top! It's smooth sailing for you from here, huh?! You're still young! You should be fighting your way up from the bottom of the heap like the filthy dog you are!”

“Says the weasel pullin' the strings behind the scenes! I chose to join the Mafia on my own, and I'm never gonna be your lackey, much less your dog! I don't give a shit what you're schemin'!” Chuuya snapped back as if not to be outdone. “And ya know what? I did a little investigatin', and I found out that *someone* poured their drink on the arcade stick I was usin' so the buttons would stick! Which means none of that game even counted!”

“Excuse me? Sounds like *someone's* a sore loser. Do you have any proof it was me? Or maybe you heard I've been passing out weekly ‘Chuuya's a Sore Loser’ newsletters and simply wanted to help me write a piece for the upcoming issue?”

“I'd rather die than help y— Wait. Hold on. Is *that* why everyone was smirking at me on my first day?!”

The two teenagers noisily traded barbs while the adults sighed and shook their heads.

“Boss, are you sure it was a good idea to have both of them in the same organization?” the woman in the kimono asked Mori.

“I am, Kouyou.” He smiled. “It only works with both of them here.”

Mori looked at the hat Chuuya was holding: a black porkpie, the gift Mori had given him the day he officially joined the Mafia.

“What’s the hat for?”

A few days earlier, Chuuya was staring at a hat in Mori’s top-floor office at Mafia HQ.

“It signifies your acceptance into the Mafia,” Mori explained with a smile as he stood facing Chuuya. “Whoever recruits a new member into the organization usually looks after them as well. It’s custom to gift the new recruit with something they can wear as a symbol of that bond. I gave Dazai his black overcoat, and I’m giving you this.”

“It’s pretty old, eh?” Chuuya flipped the black hat over and examined it closely. “I don’t hate it, but...Dazai’s coat is brand-new. Why’d I get something from a thrift shop? Budget cuts?”

“That didn’t come from any thrift shop,” Mori replied with a wry smirk. “It belonged to Randou.”

Chuuya stared wide-eyed at the Port Mafia leader. He then held the hat more properly and gave it another look.

“I had most of his belongings burned, but I made sure to examine everything at least once before doing so,” Mori, now seated at his desk, admitted. “It seems he started looking into his last spy mission two months before his death. His memories must have gradually started returning. Furthermore, he kept records of his investigation—the secret facility he snuck into, information on his partner’s whereabouts, and data on the being known as Arahabaki that the military was researching.”

Chuuya stared hard at Mori in an attempt to get a read on him, but Mori’s smirk didn’t fade. It was as if a fog was hiding what lay within the depths of his mind. He continued:

“Randou wasn’t able to get close to the truth, but he did learn a few insights. Apparently, the military facility he infiltrated was researching how to combine skills with living beings. That is, they were researching *artificial skills*.”

“‘Artificial skills’...for the military?”

“That’s not all. Arahabaki is merely the name witnesses of the explosion gave it eight years ago. Naturally, it had another name at the research facility: Prototype A2-5-8.”

Chuuya’s eyes widened. After observing his reaction for a few moments, Mori opened his desk drawer and took out a manila envelope.

“These are Randou’s records.” Mori held out the envelope to show Chuuya. “There are various other interesting details written in here as well.”

“The truth...is in there...” Chuuya unconsciously reached out for them. “What Arahabaki really is—what I really am...”

But right as his fingers were about to touch the envelope, Mori swiftly pulled it away. Chuuya looked at him with a dubious glare.

“Sorry, but these once belonged to a man who betrayed the organization,” Mori explained with his usual smile. “We would usually burn these under normal circumstances. Therefore, I cannot simply show them to anyone. These documents are for executives’ eyes only.”

Chuuya quietly stared at him, not moving a muscle. Several brief, condensed seconds of silence filled the space between them.

“So I gotta keep producing good results until I’m promoted to an executive, and then you’ll show me them... That’s what you’re sayin’, huh?” said Chuuya. “All precautions to make sure I don’t betray the organization?”

“I’m not worried about that.” Mori had a professorial smile on his face. “There’s something *you* should be worried about, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Dazai. Both of you are extremely gifted. In my eyes, you’re more or less equally matched. As my direct subordinate and right-hand man, however, Dazai is most likely next in line to become an executive. Which is why I have to wonder: ‘What’s going to happen if he receives access to these documents before you?’ Don’t you think he might memorize the documents and then burn them so that he can force you into doing whatever he wants?”

Chuuya's face instantly turned pale. He knew he would have to go through hell to get the information out of Dazai if that ever happened.

"Only a diamond can polish a diamond." Mori smirked with evident satisfaction. "The well-being of this organization depends on your joint effort. I want to prove that we can outdo the previous leader without relying on violence, fear, and murder."

Chuuya's feelings at that moment were indescribable.

"I...", he began, straining his teenage voice. He softly placed a hand on his still aching wound. "I was the leader of the Sheep, but all I did was enable their dependency on me and make things harder for them. I'm not completely against joining the Mafia and taking orders from you, but I need you to tell me this one thing first: What does it mean to be a leader?"

Mori's smile vanished inside the young man's serious gaze. Mori closed his eyes, then opened them again. At last, he spoke earnestly, sincerely—a side of him he had never shown anyone.

"A leader is simultaneously at the top of an organization and still a slave to it as a whole," he answered. "You need to be willing to get your hands dirty to keep the organization afloat and thriving. A leader develops their subordinates and places them wherever they best fit and disposes of them if necessary. I will gladly perform the most heinous acts for the sake of this organization. That's what it means to be a leader. I do it all for..."

Mori turned his gaze to the collection of buildings and streets out the window.

"I do it all for the organization and the protection of this beloved city."

Chuuya listened with clear eyes. His expression was pure as a newborn baby.

"And that's...what I was missing," he said.

Chuuya faced forward, got on one knee, and lowered his head. Then, in the dignified, sharp voice of a general, he added:

"I dedicate my blood—my everything—to you, boss. I will protect this organization you slave over and work myself to the bone in order to decimate

its enemies. Those who oppose the Port Mafia will learn firsthand how ruthless gravity can be.”



Mori watched in silence as the young man bowed to him with utmost deference.

The Mafia boss's smile was unlike any other that had appeared on his face. It was neither mysterious nor suggestive but an ordinary smile that anyone makes when they're happy. And then he simply replied:

"I'll be counting on you."



This concludes the details of the recruitment of Port Mafia executive Chuuya Nakahara and former Port Mafia executive Osamu Dazai.

The organization flourished under Mori's new leadership. They established an economic foundation and skillfully formed mutualistic ties with the Japanese government, making it difficult for any judicial branch to lay a finger on them.

Catastrophe struck one year later when war broke out among every illegal organization in Yokohama in what is known as the Dragon's Head Conflict, the bloodiest incident in the history of the Yokohama underground. Nevertheless, the Port Mafia survived the ordeal with minimal casualties and was therefore able to expand its territory on the whole. The other organizations' weakened states helped the Mafia to establish the solid framework of its current system of rule.

Furthermore, Chuuya's tremendous achievements were a great boon to the organization, granting him access to Randou's old files even before he was officially installed as an executive. Further information regarding Dazai's and Chuuya's actions to uncover the conspiracy behind the now-defunct research facility will be included along with Chuuya's origins in a separate report.

This concludes the report on the Arahabaki Incident.

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I-41-90-C

PORT MAFIA SKILL-USER REPORT, ARAHABAKI INCIDENT

ANALYST:

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HOME AFFAIRS MINISTRY, SPECIAL DIVISION FOR UNUSUAL POWERS



SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENT

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ANALYST:

XXXX XXXXXXXX

SENSITIVE DOCUMENT DESIGNATION: TOP SECRET

The Port Mafia never sleeps, no matter how deep into the night.

That evening, its headquarters were submerged in darkness at the center of Yokohama’s Demon City. The guards stationed on its top floor were the Mafia’s most exceptional and loyal members, even among the organization’s many capable soldiers. And the leader’s office, also located on the top floor, was its own impregnable fortress. No one could get inside without permission. Not even the faintest light could sneak its way in.

Standing in front of the office were two guards. The leader wasn’t there at the moment, so they were merely protecting an empty room. Nevertheless, they both looked highly alert. No matter where they were or who they were up against, they would carry out their mission without their emotions getting in the way. Only the mentally strong were entrusted with such a task.

Their silent watch saw no conversations—not even a single cough.

That was when one of the guards heard a faint sound: a feeble clink even

softer than the buzzing of a fly. It was so faint that one could miss it among the sound of their own breathing. There was no telling where the noise was coming from, but the guard who had been standing in complete silence for hours still picked it up. He strained his ears and kept his gun at the ready.

“What is it?”

“Do you hear that?” he asked his colleague while focusing on his surroundings.

Once again, he heard the sound: a clink followed by papers being flipped through. No way anyone could miss it. The other guard readied his submachine gun.

There was no one on the top floor during those hours aside from the guards. The building was tightly sealed to keep out even the lightest of drafts, meaning the sound they heard couldn’t possibly be from the wind or any other natural source.

Before them was a long hallway; behind them, the leader’s office. The hallway was empty...which meant...

“The office...?”

The guard audibly tensed. Using only his eyes and hands, he signaled his colleague to open the office door. His colleague took out the key chained to his wrist and proceeded to unlock each of the three keyholes one at a time. And then...he threw open the door.

There was a tall silhouette in the room—a young man with long arms and legs, standing with his back to the moonlight. He looked up from the documents in his hand and asked:

“What took you so long?”

“Freeze! Who are you?! How did you get inside?!” the guard shouted, his gun pointed at the intruder.

“‘How’? What a strange question. I just walked through the front door, right past you.”

The guard looked furious. Both he and his colleague had remained fully alert

the entire time they were watching the door. Not even an insect could have gotten past them, much less a person.

The young man calmly smirked, his tall figure bathed in the moonlight. He was as graceful as a bow; every one of his movements was somehow magical. His high-quality suit the color of the midnight sea was without a single wrinkle. He looked like a film star or perhaps a fanciful, ancient Nordic god.

“I came to do some reading. This in particular,” the young man revealed while holding up some documents. They were the same files Mori had showed Chuuya that day—the data Randou had gathered on Arahabaki. “It was quite the read, especially this passage the agent added here: ‘Randou’s former partner, the spy Paul Verlaine, perished in battle following his betrayal.’ He really did lose his memories, huh? Because as you can see, I am definitely not dead.”

“Put the documents down. Resist and I’ll shoot,” the guard warned, submachine gun still at the ready.

He then pressed the device hidden in the lining of his clothing to alert the security office of an intruder. Usually, an alarm would immediately sound throughout the entire building and every passage would automatically be closed off. But nothing happened.

“Oh, sorry if I got your hopes up. That isn’t going to work. I had everyone in the security office take the rest of the day off—and I don’t think they’ll be coming back.”

The case to the building’s electronic master key was lying by the young man’s feet. The guard noticed it was stained with blood and immediately realized what had happened:

The other guards were already dead.

“I was genuinely hoping there wouldn’t be any bloodshed,” said the young man. “After all, I didn’t come here to fight. I merely stopped by to pick up my dearest friend’s last records—these files—along with this hat that got left behind in the changing room.”

Before the guard even realized it, the intruder had a black hat atop one hand.

It was the hat Mori had given Chuuya.

“This is your final warning. You have five seconds to surrender, or we’ll shoot,” the guard cautioned, although nonetheless prepared for inevitable bloodshed.

Normally, killing an intruder was a last resort. It was better to capture them alive and force them to share what they were doing here and who sent them. That was simply how things worked in the Mafia. But this intruder was different. That much the guard could tell from his many years within the Mafia’s darkness. In fact, the intruder was deeper than darkness itself. He was most likely a skill user, which meant the normal rules of combat didn’t apply to him.

The only predictable skill user was a dead one. That was why the guard warned he would shoot in five seconds. It was Mafia code to open fire without waiting even a second, much less five.

Fire, the guard silently urged his colleague. However, not a single shot followed. He looked curiously over to his side to see his colleague standing stock-still, gun pointed.

He was missing his head.

“Wha—?”

The guard’s jaw dropped. Mental alarm bells ringing, he reflexively pulled his gun’s trigger.

But he couldn’t—his index finger was lying severed on the floor.

His weapon had been severed as well.

Then his severed hands and arms fell to the floor, followed by his torso, his legs, his jaw, nose, and skull. Only his thighs to his feet remained standing in place as if nothing had happened.

There were no screams—just two unnaturally silent deaths.

“Phew. What a relief. It would be tactless to ruin this perfect moonlit night with gunfire.”

The intruder smiled calmly. He placed the stack of papers back on the desk, then walked to the window at the other end of the room. The pale moon was

shining through.

“Where are you, Arahabaki—Chuuya Nakahara?” the young man wondered aloud as he gazed out the window. “I owe you for killing my partner—no, my former partner—for me. You’ve apparently grown much stronger. But not to worry. I’ll be with you soon.”

He placed a hand on the window, which was made with reinforced laminated glass to protect the Mafia boss from snipers and anti-tank guns. It was even heat and shock resistant.

“The calamity that breathes—the god with a beating heart—Arahabaki, you are alone. Nobody can ever understand you. You are neither a god nor a human. You will simply struggle amid your fellows before dying with nothing but your own embrace to comfort you... That is, unless you come with me.”

The young man gently twisted his body and thrust out one leg.

In technical terms, it could be described as a kick, but the movement itself was far more elegant; it was as silent as the unfurling of feathery wings. The ball of his foot appeared to draw a line through the air before shattering the window into pieces.

Shards of inch-thick reinforced glass fell to the street below like countless drops of glittering rain.

“It was a long wait, but the time has finally arrived, Chuuya Nakahara.”

The young man’s eyes wavered with the moon’s silvery glow.

“I’m coming to get you, my *dear younger brother*.”

He donned the black hat and gently leaped out the window. His body was swallowed by the darkness below before eventually disappearing. All that remained was the sound of the gentle evening breeze.

The curtain of night...

The clusters of shadows piled one atop the other...

The innermost depths of Yokohama’s long night were utterly unknowable.

To be continued in Storm Bringer

AFTERWORD

Right when you're basking in the afterglow of the story, here comes the all-too-familiar afterword to ruin the mood.

Dazai, Chuuya, Age Fifteen is the latest novel in the *Bungo Stray Dogs* series. It's actually based on a bonus story given to those who saw 2018's *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple* film in theaters. The previous volume, *Beast*, is based on the story given to everyone who saw *Dead Apple* the first week the movie came out, while this one's based on the story from the second week.

This novel, meanwhile, is the definitive edition of that second story and includes new scenes and added details. The last scene in particular was written solely for this book and was not included in the story moviegoers received.

When the film's production committee asked me to write this novel, they had two requests: One, it had to be about Chuuya and Dazai, and two, it had to take place in the past.

Ah, the time has finally come, I thought.

Chuuya made his debut in the third volume of the manga, where it was explained that he and Dazai used to be partners. But that was it. What kind of cases did they solve as partners? How long were they partners? What was their relationship like? All that was shrouded in total darkness. At the time, I was fine with that. The imagination is a powerful thing, more powerful than awareness itself. It's just like going to the dentist: The scariest part is when you're in the waiting room. When I imagined what Dazai and Chuuya had been like as a duo, my mind automatically jumped to the havoc they'd wreaked together. So I always kept that to myself.

And I believed I made the right decision, at least for a few years. It allowed many people to imagine the pair's past for themselves. Dazai and Chuuya ran amok in countless fans' heads until they broke through the walls and created

their own personal kingdoms in each individual's imagination. Eventually, people started telling me: "I've daydreamed about their pasts so much that it's about time I get some answers."

I don't blame them. That's why I decided to write about the pair's past as slowly and steadily as possible in order not to shock anyone too much.

That's where this novel comes in. It takes place seven years before the events of the manga. Some parts are already complete while others are more malleable. I tried to give readers a sense of how Dazai and Chuuya evolved into adults over those seven years. (The changes themselves are still shrouded in darkness, left up to the imagination.)

So how did the story compare to what you'd imagined? Was it just as you thought it'd be? Or was it different? As the author, I believe it's a little bit of both.

But the story doesn't end here. There are still a few important mysteries that need solving, a few untold tales about what happened during those seven years. And there's yet an even bigger secret than what was revealed in this book.

Why would I hide something so momentous? It makes you wonder if there's a mysterious reason behind it or if I'm just being a jerk. But the truth is simple: I didn't have enough time to write about it in the bonus booklet. (Sorry about that.)

Which is why this story will be continued in the next novel, *Storm Bringer*. There are still many other stories to be told, and I'm sure I won't have time to dive into them all in this next book, either. That said, I do plan on cramming enough details inside that'll give a satisfying conclusion to Twin Dark's past.

Oh, right. One more thing. *Dazai, Chuuya, Age Fifteen* was well received by the animation staff, especially the director Igarashi, which led to an anime adaptation broadcast on TV in April 2019. Dazai and Chuuya's teenage years were vividly reproduced with beautiful animation, exciting action scenes, and, most of all, extraordinary voice acting. Please check it out for yourself on a screen near you.

And before I go, I would like to give thanks to the following: the *Dead Apple*

production committee; Shirahama in Beans Bunko's editorial department; Sango Harukawa, who illustrated the cover and interior artwork; every distributor and bookstore; and most of all, everyone who picked up this book. Thank you all.

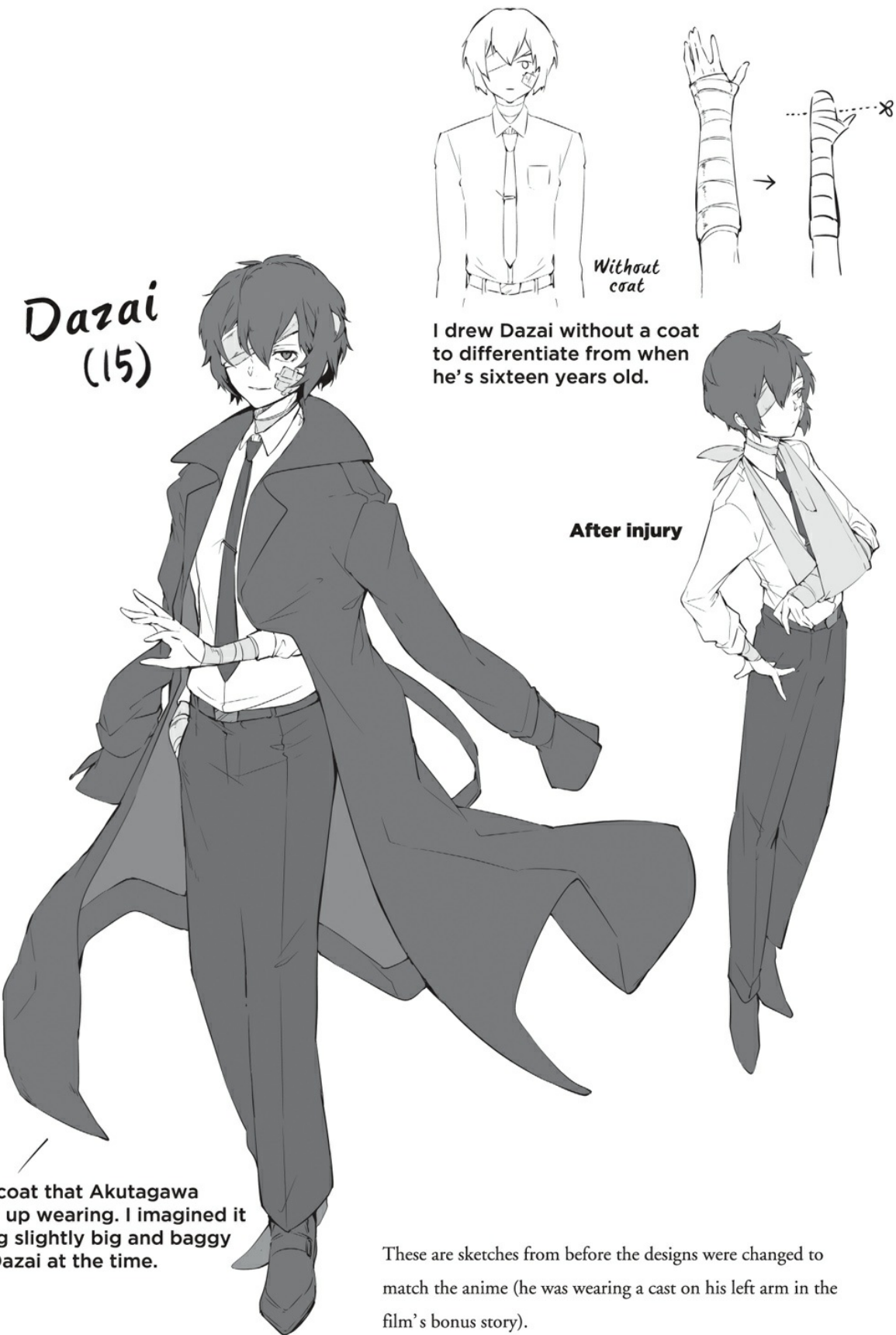
Let's meet again in the next installment.

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Special Thanks

Original Story and Script Supervision by Kafka Asagiri Manga Illustration by Sango Harukawa Director: Takuya Igarashi Script: Yoji Enokido Character Design and Chief Animation Director: Nobuhiro Arai

This novel is the complete version of the bonus story “Dazai, Chuuya, Age Fifteen” given to audiences during the second week of the animated movie *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple*’s theatrical release in 2018.



Dazai
(15)

Without
coat

I drew Dazai without a coat
to differentiate from when
he's sixteen years old.

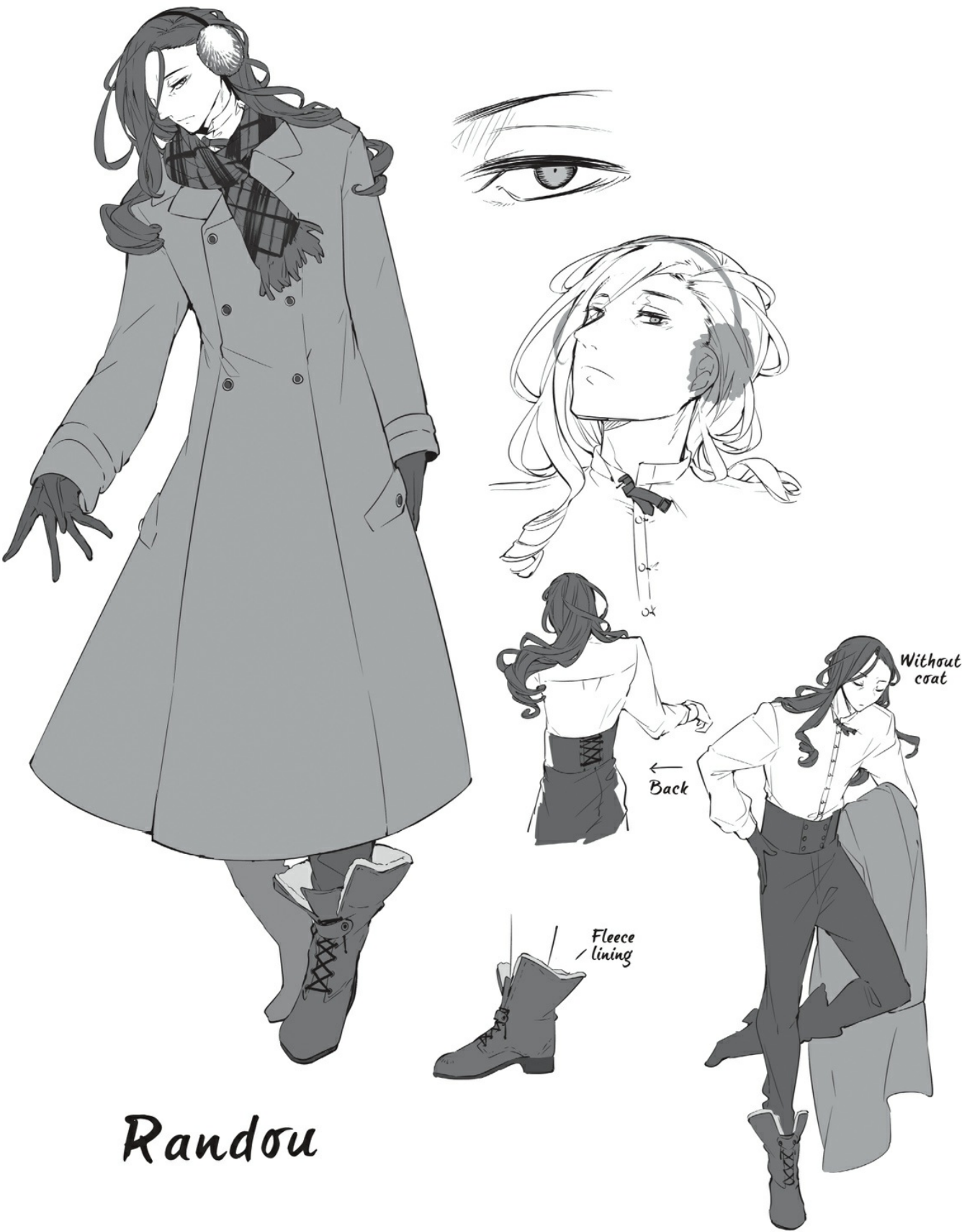
After injury

The coat that Akutagawa
ends up wearing. I imagined it
being slightly big and baggy
for Dazai at the time.

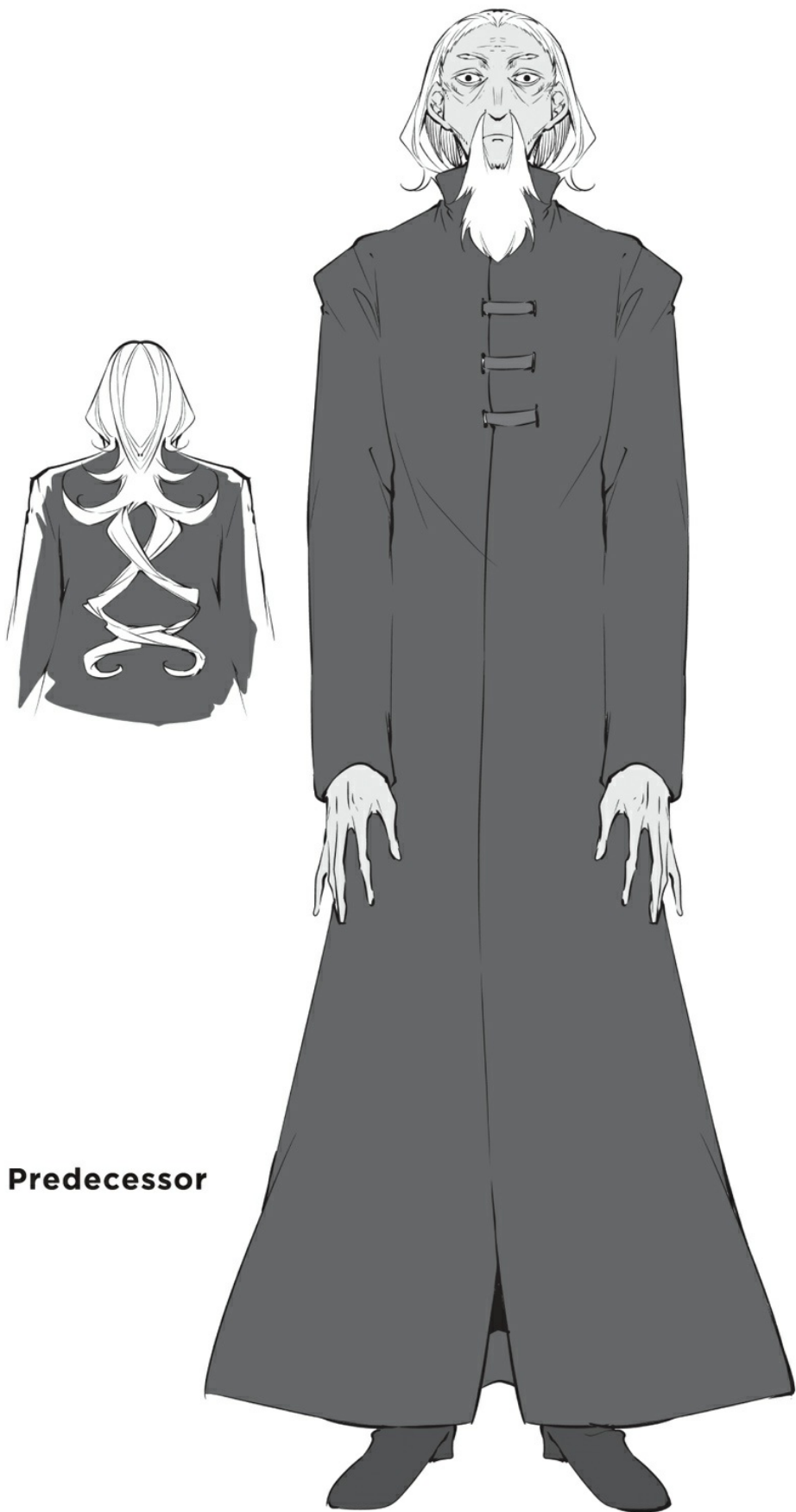
These are sketches from before the designs were changed to
match the anime (he was wearing a cast on his left arm in the
film's bonus story).

Chuuya (15)





Randou



Predecessor





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